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An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Of How Transgender and Gender Expansive Youth Experience Their Gender Identities

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS
OF HOW TRANSGENDER AND GENDER
EXPANSIVE YOUTH EXPERIENCE
THEIR GENDER IDENTITIES

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Michelle N. Saltis

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
Department of Applied Psychology & Counselor Education
Counselor Education and Supervision

May 2021

This Dissertation by: Michelle N. Saltis

Entitled: *An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of how Transgender and Gender Expansive Youth Experience Their Gender Identities*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education, Program of Counselor Education and Supervision.

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation presents findings from the first known Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis study of how nine transgender and/or gender expansive youth, aged 13-17, experienced their gender identities and additional intersecting identities. The purpose of this study was to share how transgender and/or gender expansive youth experienced their gender identities, additional intersecting identities, and how they made meaning of these experiences within the contexts of current social, cultural, political, and historical factors. Additionally, this study sought to share the participants' stories within their own words.

The primary research question for this study was: how do transgender and gender expansive youth (TGEY) experience their gender identity? The two guiding sub-questions explored how TGEY experienced their gender identity in relation to their additional intersecting identities, and how TGEY made meaning of their experiences, identities, and their experiences within their identities. The participants engaged in two 60-90 minute interviews with a member-checking meeting following data analysis to ensure their own words were at the forefront of the research. Six superordinate themes highlighted the participants' narratives and experiences: (1) Gender Identity Journey and Coming Out; (2) Identities and Experiences of Oppression; (3) Navigating Mental Health and Physical Health; (4) Interpersonal Relationships; (5) Navigating Contextual Factors;

(6) Making Sense of Experiences and Resiliency. These superordinate themes encompassed their gender journeys, experiences of multiple forms of oppression, their interpersonal relationships, mental and physical health concerns, navigating the historical, political, social, and cultural contextual factors within their lives, and their resiliency. Many of the participants' experiences echoed findings in the literature, while simultaneously strengthening these findings due to the rich qualitative nature of this study.

Results from this study have profound implications within the field of counselor education by increasing the knowledge in the field around the complex and nuanced lives of transgender and/or gender expansive youth. The results of this study address an important gap in the counseling literature and provides important implications and conclusions for counselors-in-training, counselors, and counselor educators. The results provide rich narrative of the participants' lives, intersecting identities and various contextual factors such as historical, social, political, cultural, and historical factors. In addition, counselor educators are able to use these results to help train future counselors and supervisors to engage in transaffirmative approaches with transgender and/or gender expansive youth. Lastly, this study and the results therein are an act of social justice itself by de-centering the researcher's views and centering that of transgender and/or gender expansive youth.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There are approximately 1.4 million transgender adults living in the United States, which is 0.6 percent of the population (Flores et al., 2016; Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018). While younger adults (18-24) are more likely to identify as transgender than adults in older age groups, children and adolescents have the highest rate of transgender and gender expansive identities in the population (Flores et al., 2016). The prevalence of transgender and gender expansive youth (TGEY) in the overall population of the United States is estimated at one percent of the population with an even larger percentage exploring their gender identity (Clark et al., 2014; Shields et al., 2013; Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018).

TGEY face unique societal discrimination and oppression compared to their peers who are cisgender. This includes experiencing higher rates of peer bullying, poor peer relations, rejection from peers, lack of belongingness at school, lack of support from caregivers, lack of safe environments, poor access to health services, and inadequate resources to meet their mental health needs (Clark et al., 2014; de Vries et al., 2016; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Hatchel et al., 2019; McGuire et al., 2010). The impact of this societal discrimination and oppression results in TGEY having increased rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidality compared to their cisgender peers (Aitken et al., 2016; Clark et al., 2014; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007; Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018).

The prevalence of mental health symptoms tends to increase with age, indicating the importance of early mental health support for TGEY (de Vries et al., 2011; Steensma et al., 2013). Given the severity of mental health concerns with TGEY, it is imperative that counselors and counselor educators have an in-depth understanding of the experiences and gender identities of TGEY. This increased understanding can help counselors and counselor educators to provide a safe space for TGEY to address their mental health concerns while actively working against the perpetuation (whether intentionally or unintendedly) of oppression against TGEY.

While TGEY have struggled with the effects of oppression for decades, attitudes towards TGEY in the mental health professions in the United States are changing towards more acceptance. As the United States moves towards more acceptance of transgender and gender expansive identities and becomes more aware of the mental health needs of TGEY, mental health professionals have seen an increase in TGEY seeking services (Aitken et al., 2015; Chen et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2013). While numerous models for working clinically with TGEY exist in the literature, a transaffirmative approach (sometimes referred to as a gender affirmative approach) taken by clinicians in collaboration with families is considered the best approach in supporting this population in navigating their unique social, mental health and physical needs (Ehrensaft, 2011, 2012; Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018). A transaffirmative approach with TGEY provides a positive and accepting environment in which TGEY can explore their identities. It also includes allowing them space to persist or desist in their transgender or gender expansive identities. A transaffirmative approach includes accepting social transition at any age, which could include changing hair, name, pronouns, and clothes (Ehrensaft, 2011, 2012;

Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018). Social transition is distinct from exploring gender identity in that it is marked by having social environments and people within those environments observe the child's internal sense of identity through use of affirming pronouns and affirming gender markers, though social transition is not limited to just these practices. Additionally, a transaffirmative approach includes counselors' knowledge of specific information pertaining to transgender and gender expansive people, advocacy, empowerment, and using correct pronouns (McCullough et al., 2017). A transaffirmative approach is purported to help reduce anxiety, depression, and suicidality in TGEY (Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018).

Currently, there is a paucity of literature on the counseling experiences of TGEY, although there is some recent literature on the counseling experiences of transgender and gender expansive adults. Based on the results from this current literature, counselors are continuing to perpetuate transnegative approaches to counseling with transgender and gender expansive adults (Elder, 2016; McCullough et al., 2017). Transnegative approaches to counseling consist of actions such as: invalidating a client's gender identity, using the incorrect pronouns, an insensitivity to intersectionality, and lack of knowledge of the historical, political, social, cultural and medical aspects of their lives (McCullough et al., 2017). The aforementioned studies on the counseling experiences of transgender and gender expansive adults can be used to shed some light on the potential counseling experiences of TGEY. For instance, it could be inferred from the above-mentioned literature that TGEY are also likely to be experiencing transnegative approaches in counseling from counselors who are ill-prepared to meet their needs, although further research is needed in this area. It is concerning that TGEY are likely

experiencing transnegative approaches to counseling due to their unique mental health needs, such as increased rates of depression, anxiety and suicidality. As such, counselors need to be better prepared to support the mental health needs of TGEY (Chen et al., 2016). This will also increase adherence to the multicultural and social justice counseling competency guidelines which specifically call for support for clients with varying gender identities (Ratts et al., 2016).

Background of the Problem

The counseling and counselor education fields have long been committed to multiculturalism and social justice. Multiculturalism has been called the 4th force in psychology (Pedersen, 1988), with the counseling field following suit in the recognition that counselors need to be trained to address our fast-growing multicultural, multilingual and multiracial societies (Sue, 1991; Sue and Sue, 1990). The counseling field's commitment to multiculturalism is evidenced by the original creation of the Multicultural Counseling Competencies by Sue et al., (1992). These competencies call for counselors to increase awareness, knowledge, and skills about working with culturally diverse clients (Sue et al., 1992). The creation of the Multicultural Counseling Competencies (Sue et al., 1992) was instrumental in providing a holistic framework for counselors to understand the experiences of people with historically oppressed identities, such as people who experience discrimination based on age, race, ethnicity, culture, gender identity, sexual and affectional identities, ability status, and socioeconomic status (Ratts et al., 2016). In 2016, an update to the original Multicultural Counseling Competencies was published as the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2016). This update reflected the counseling field's growing commitment to

social justice, which has been called the 5th force in Counseling (Ratts, 2009). Social justice takes multiculturalism a step further by recognizing the impact that power, privilege and oppression have on mental health (Chung & Bemak, 2012). To mirror this focus on multiculturalism and social justice, the counseling field has continued to develop competencies and publish research in this area.

The push to expand the field beyond a monocultural lens has increased published literature and competencies surrounding multicultural and social justice topics, such as how to best serve clients who are transgender and gender expansive. For instance, Turban and Ehrensaft (2018) noted the exponential increase in literature in the fields of psychology and psychiatry on gender identity within the last decade. In the counseling field specifically, the Society for Sexual, Affectional, Intersex and Gender Expansive Identities (SAIGE) (formerly the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC)) has created competencies for working with transgender clients (Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling [ALGBTIC], 2009) to address the counseling needs of this population. Literature focusing on counseling and mental health treatment of people with transgender and gender expansive identities focus on such topics as: gender identity development (Carrera et al., 2012; Ehrensaft, 2011, 2013; Fast & Olson, 2018; Olson et al., 2015), treatment models and theories (Chang & Singh, 2016; Edwards-Leeper et al., 2016; Ehrensaft, 2012, 2017; Hidalgo et al., 2013; Singh & Moss, 2016; Spivey & Edwards-Leeper, 2019; Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018), mental and behavioral health (Aitken et al., 2016; de Vries et al., 2011, 2016; Durwood et al., 2017; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006, 2007; Gutierrez, 2004; ; Hatchel et al., 2019; McGuire et al., 2010; Olson et al., 2016),

resiliency (Hatchel & Marx, 2018; Singh, 2013; Singh & McKleroy, 2011; Singh et al., 2014), general experiences of transgender and gender expansive adults within counseling (Elder, 2016; Hunt, 2014; McCullough et al., 2017), and recognizing barriers to mental health treatment for this population (Shipherd et al., 2010). Lastly, Standards of Care for Research with LGBTQ+ participants have also been published and will later be discussed in relevance to the research ethics of this study (Griffith et al., 2017). In sum, the reviewed literature highlights the increased attention to research with transgender and gender expansive populations within the counseling and related fields.

Statement of the Problem

While there is a growing body of literature within the counseling and related mental health fields on transgender and gender expansive populations, counselors have been, and are continuing to be, underprepared to work with this population (Carroll & Gilroy, 2002; Nisley, 2010; Salpietro et al., 2019; Whitman & Han, 2017). Part of this problem is that some graduate counseling programs are still providing superficial and inadequate training on striving towards providing competent care to transgender and gender expansive populations in their multicultural and social justice courses (Salpietro et al., 2019). Another part of this problem is that some counselors and other mental health professionals have reported no training or familiarity in working with transgender and gender expansive populations (Whitman & Han, 2017). It is worth noting that training programs face demands on what content must be taught in counseling classrooms, and this might limit time and resources to enable adequate training to ethically work with transgender and gender expansive people. Lastly, while many clinicians receive inadequate or no training in working with this population, a small number of counselors-

in-training hold actively intolerant views of people who are transgender and gender expansive (Nisley, 2010).

This insufficient or outright lack of training on working with transgender and gender expansive clients can lead to the perpetuation of transnegative approaches, such as various microaggressions, overt and covert forms of discrimination, and assumptions during counseling (Elder, 2016; McCullough et al., 2017; Whitman & Han, 2017). Due to the lack of sufficient training in some counseling programs in working with transgender and gender expansive populations, and the literature supporting the perpetuation of transnegative approaches, it follows that some counselors are also being undertrained to work with TGEY. Therefore, it is also likely that some counselors are perpetuating transnegative approaches with TGEY.

This inadequate training to work with TGEY in many counselor education programs is concerning, as TGEY are often invisible and vulnerable (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006), suffering from societal discrimination, rejection, and lack of resources from peers and teachers. Discrimination, rejection, and lack of resources can lead to increased mental health struggles such as depression, anxiety, self-harming behaviors, suicidal ideation, and a decreased sense of belonging in schools (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Hatchel et al., 2019; Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018). Additionally, oppression is further exacerbated when the youth hold additional historically oppressed identities, including race, ethnicity, class, and disability (Gutierrez, 2004; Singh & Moss, 2016).

In contrast, youth who are supported in their gender identities, such as having support with socially transitioning, have similar rates of anxiety and depression to their cisgender peers and higher rates of self-worth than youth who are not supported in their

transition (Durwood et al., 2017; Olson et al., 2016). Additionally, the higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidality that TGEY experience can be reduced through transaffirmative approaches in counseling (Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018). Part of providing transaffirmative care to TGEY is through valuing how TGEY define their own transgender and gender expansive identities (Singh et al., 2014). It has also been recommended in the counseling literature that mental health practitioners continuously aspire to gain more knowledge, skills, and awareness of the lives, experiences and genders of TGEY (ALGBTIC, 2009; Singh et al., 2014). This also aligns with the core components of the MSJCC (Ratts et al., 2016).

To date, there are no known studies of how TGEY experience their gender identities in their own words, indicating that a gap in the counseling literature exists. This gap in the literature is a problem because increased knowledge and awareness of how TGEY experience their gender identities is an important piece in working toward multicultural and social justice competency. It is also an important component of being a transaffirmative counselor. Providing transaffirmative care to TGEY is important in supporting TGEY in their gender identities as well as mitigating and addressing the impacts of oppression on the lives of TGEY. This study attempted to address this gap in the literature through researching how TGEY experienced their gender identities in their own words. By doing so, the results of this study will help increase the knowledge and awareness of counselors-in-training, counselors, and counselor educators in understanding how TGEY experience their gender identities in order to best support TGEY.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to explore how TGEY experience their gender identity, navigate the intersections between their gender identity, and the meaning they made from these experiences in their own words. Another purpose of this study was to gather, in youths' own words, the nuances of how today's youth understand and make meaning of their gender identity, and the intersections of their gender identities with additional identities (i.e., race, ethnicity, class, ability/disability, sexual/romantic/affectional identities). Further, how TGEY are situated within larger social, historical, cultural, and political contexts, with a focus on the interplay of power, privilege and oppression provided context for this study. All of these components together contributed to an increased understanding of the lives and experiences of TGEY from their own words.

Research Questions

There is one primary research question and two sub-research questions for this study:

- Q1 How do transgender and gender expansive youth experience their gender identity?
- SQ1 How do transgender and gender expansive youth experience their gender identity in relation to their intersecting identities?
- SQ2 How do youth who identify within transgender and gender expansive identities make meaning of their experiences, their identities, and their experiences within their identities?

Significance of the Study

The primary significance of this study was that it has the potential to address the dearth in the professional counseling literature around the complexities in experiences of

TGEY by answering the call from the multicultural and social justice counseling literature for increased research with transgender and gender expansive people (ALGBTIC, 2009; Carroll & Gilroy, 2002; McCullough et al., 2017). It also addresses the need for more literature where TGEY describe their gender and experiences in their own words (Singh & Moss, 2016). Additionally, this study situated how TGEY experience their gender identities within historical, political, social, cultural, and contextual factors. Through the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study focused on power, privilege, and oppression. This provides a more complex understanding of the nuanced factors influencing the lives of TGEY.

A further significance of this study is that readers of this study (such as counselors or counselors-in-training) may increase their own self-awareness. As stated within the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (Ratts et al., 2016), the first step in striving toward competence with multicultural and social justice issues starts with the counselor's awareness of their own privileged and oppressed identities, biases and assumptions. In working with TGEY specifically, it has been recommended that mental health practitioners reflect on their own gender identity and gender journey (Singh & Moss, 2016). In reading the experiences of TGEY shared by this study, there is also the potential that professional counselors will deconstruct their own presuppositions and beliefs about sex, gender expression, and gender identity, starting with their own identities. Lastly, it is hoped that professional counselors will be able to reflect upon the meaning made from the experiences of participants by critically engaging with the stories shared by TGEY.

Assumptions and Subjectivities

There are numerous assumptions that have been made in the preparation of this study and are presented as follows. One assumption was that participants had a deep understanding of their gender identities, additional identities, and how their identities intersected with their daily lives. Another assumption was that adolescents are able to make meaning of their experiences, their identities, and their experiences within their identities. The researcher also assumed that this study would help provide a space in the literature for TGEY to share their unique experiences and understandings of their identity. Additionally, the researcher also assumed that the results from this study would help provide the counseling field with more knowledge about how TGEY experience their gender identity through an intersectional lens.

It is also important to name the subjectivities of this study. Awareness of power as the researcher was of utmost importance. Being older and white could have created power dynamics that shifted participants' responses, such as withholding information or feeling pressured to share information. Additionally, having a shared identity (or identities) with the participants could have facilitated participants' trust and safety. The researcher also believes that gender identity is complex, fluid, and exists within and outside of a gender binary.

Limitations and Delimitations

There are some known limitations and delimitations to this study. Since IPA studies are idiographic in nature, few participants are used to gather in-depth data around their experiences, which may limit transferability (Miller et al., 2018); this may operate as a limitation. However, the idiographic nature will also provide for in-depth accounts of

how TGEY are experiencing their gender identities, which supersedes transferability of results due to the complex and nuanced nature of gender identity.

A delimitation of this study was the inclusion and exclusion criteria for participation. Geographically, the youth for this study were recruited from the state of Colorado to facilitate access to participants. This was decided by the researcher in order to align with IPA methods of meeting face-to-face with participants when possible. A resulting limitation from this choice was results may not be transferable to TGEY of other geographical locations due to contextual factors such as political climate and the general cultural of the geographic region around the levels of privilege and oppression. Since the participants were recruited from a primarily white state, this had the potential to limit racial and ethnic participants. To account for this, participants were selected purposefully to represent a variety of races, ethnicities, classes, abilities/disabilities, religions, spiritualities, and sexual/affectional/romantic identities.

Another limitation of this study was the time commitment, which may have excluded some potential participants. It may have been difficult for participants to commit to two 90-minute interviews. Therefore, it might have been difficult to recruit participants who were able to engage in the entire interview process.

Definitions of Terms

Cisgender: This term is used to define any individual whose gender identity matches their sex assigned at birth.

Gender Binary: The gender binary is rooted in heterosexism and asserts that there are two genders, often conflated with sex (male/female). (Carrera et al., 2012).

Gender Expansive: The term Gender Expansive is used to convey any identities that are different from a person's sex assigned at birth and does not fit into the traditional man/woman or boy/girl binary. Examples of this could include identities such as: nonbinary, gender nonconforming, gender fluid, agender, and genderqueer.

Gender Expression: Gender expression is the way one chooses to express their gender, such as clothing choices, haircuts, activity preferences and friendships (Ehrensaft, 2017).

Gender Identity: Gender identity is one's cognitive and felt sense of one's gender and how they understand their gender identity. Gender identity can be fluid and change over one's lifetime, day to day, and fall outside of the gender binary. One's gender identity is a complex constellation of nurture, nature, and culture (Ehrensaft, 2017).

In loco parentis: This is the process by which a trusted adult takes on some of the legal responsibilities of a parent. In this dissertation, this process is used during the assent process, where the TGEY chooses a trusted adult who will be present.

Intersectionality: Intersectionality is the phenomenon in which an individual who holds two or more oppressed identities (ie. a transgender person of color) experiences oppression such that it is impossible to separate out which aspects of one's identity are the cause of the oppression (Ratts et al., 2016). This term is often confused with the term intersection, in which people's intersecting identities are often used as ways to understand their experiences. The difference is in that intersectionality is solely referred to as the phenomenon that occurs as the results of oppression for multiple identities as once.

LGBTQ+: An acronym which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and different identities which fall under this umbrella.

Monocultural: This term refers to looking at one aspect of a person's identity, such as their race, and not including additional aspects of their identity in describing or understanding a person.

Multiculturalism and Multicultural Counseling: Multicultural counseling is espoused as the fourth force in the counseling literature and is often credited to Sue et al., (1992). Aspects of multiculturalism and respect for diversity is now included within the American Counseling Association's (2014) ethical codes and competencies for the field. Counselors striving towards the process of being a multiculturally competent counselor, obtain knowledge, skills, and awareness around clients' identities and culture (Ratts, 2009; Sue et al., 1992).

Oppression: Those members of society that are not privileged experience various barriers and lack of resources (Black & Stone, 2005). Oppression can be defined as any dehumanizing interaction that occurs over time (Ratts et al., 2016) and can include 'silence, disenfranchisement, discrimination, and ostracism (Singh & Salazar, 2010). Oppression can occur at the individual level in the form of microaggressions (Pierce, 1970) and with larger systemic inequities such as rules, policies and laws that privilege one group over another (Ratts, et al., 2016). Additionally, individuals can experience multiple forms of oppression based on various marginalized identities, which has been called intersectionality in the literature (Crenshaw, 1989; Ratts et al., 2016). It is also important to note that an

individual can experience multiple different oppressed and marginalized identities (Ratts, 2017; Ratts et al., 2016).

‘Out’: This term is used within the sexual, affectional, intersex, and gender expansive communities to delineate when a person’s status of being within that community is shared with others without the person’s permission. It can also be used to describe the process of ‘outing’ someone – disclosing a person’s status as within the sexual, affectional, intersex and gender expansive communities without their permission and/or knowledge.

Privilege: In many societies, certain groups of people are given privileges over others in society based on various identities, such as race/ethnicity, or class. Those members of the privileged groups are given various dominance, power and entitlements over other members of society (Black & Stone, 2005). People that have privileged status in society are granted special rights and entitlements is related to a preferred rank or status at the exclusion of others in society, and it is often outside of the privileged person’s awareness (Black & Stone, 2005).

SAIGE: An acronym which stands for sexual, affectional, intersex and gender expansive. This term will be used throughout this dissertation as an umbrella term. It is considered a more updated and inclusive acronym than LGBTQ+ in academic spaces.

Sex Assigned at Birth: This term is used to define how the sex of a newborn baby was assigned at birth, which is typically done by a clinician at birth and/or through ultrasound based on one’s outwardly appearing genitals. One’s gender identity

may or may not align with their sex assigned at birth (Ehrensaft, 2017; Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018).

Sexual/Affectional/Romantic Identities: These terms include how a person is attracted to another person and the types of affectional and romantic relationships a person chooses. This is often conflated with a person's sex assigned at birth or gender, but they are two separate and distinct aspects of a person's identity. Sexual identity refers to who a person may be attracted to sexually; terms can include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual. Affectional identity refers to who a person may feel affectionately towards; terms can include asexual and demisexual. Romantic identity can include who a person is romantically attracted to, such as the type of people they wish to date.

Social Justice Counseling: Both social justice and multiculturalism (elaborated on above) espouse inclusivity, eradicating oppression and embracing diversity (Ratts, 2017). Social justice has been called the 'fifth force' in counseling and counselor education and moves beyond the individual focus of multiculturalism to include recognizing broader social contexts on clients' lives (Ratts, 2009). Social Justice counseling recognizes the impact of power, privilege, and oppression on client's lives and within the counseling space (Fouad et al., 2006; Ratts, 2009). Additionally, social justice counseling moves beyond multiculturalism by necessitating social advocacy and advocacy in an attempt to remove barriers for people experiencing marginalization and oppression in society (Ratts, 2009).

Transgender: The term Transgender is used to define any individual whose gender identity does not match their sex assigned at birth. Transgender is a large

umbrella-term which captures a wide-range of gender identities, including but not limited to nonbinary, gender nonconforming, gender expansive, gender fluid, agender, and genderqueer. (Carrera et al., 2012; Turban et al., 2017).

Conclusion

The need for increased research on the experiences of TGEY in their own words has been documented within the counselor education literature and related fields (ALGBTIC, 2009; Singh et al., 2014; Singh & Moss, 2016). Based on the prevalence of transnegative approaches in counseling (Elder, 2016; McCullough et al., 2017; Salpietro et al., 2019), which include not understanding the gender identities, words, labels, and language of TGEY, more knowledge about how TGEY experience their gender identities is needed in the literature and counseling training programs. Additionally, since a part of striving towards increased multicultural and social justice competence includes increased knowledge about the identities and experiences of certain populations, having an increased knowledge about how TGEY are experiencing their gender identities has the potential to increase the multicultural and social justice counseling competence of counselors, counselors-in-training, and counselor educators (ALGBTIC, 2009; Ratts et al., 2016). This study offers a beginning to understanding of how TGEY experience their gender identities. This has the potential to increase counselors' knowledge, awareness, and understanding of TGEY. Through this increase of knowledge, awareness and understanding, counselors and related mental health professionals can continue on their journey to multicultural and social justice competence and ability to provide transaffirmative care for TGEY. By contributing to the competence of counselors in providing transaffirmative care to TGEY, the findings of this study may improve the

quality of care that TGEY receive by counselors by increasing counselors' knowledge of their experiences. Through increased transaffirmative care being provided to TGEY, it is hoped that TGEY will receive counseling that aims to address and heal the impact of oppression on their mental health (Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

This chapter will first provide a broad exploration of multiculturalism and social justice within Counselor Education and Supervision. This exploration will precede a more in-depth exploration of oppression and the effects of oppression on people who identify as transgender and youth. Next, this chapter will explore the impact of oppression on the mental health of transgender and gender expansive youth (TGEY). After this exploration, this chapter will highlight what is known and the gaps in knowledge around the gender identity development of TGEY within the literature from counseling, counselor education and related fields. Lastly, transnegative and transaffirmative approaches to counseling will be explored within the framework of counselor education.

Multiculturalism and Social Justice

Multiculturalism is defined as the various knowledge, skills, and awareness counselors need to work with diverse clients from a more holistic framework, expanding beyond the monocultural lens previously permeating the field (Sue et al., 1992; Sue & Sue, 2016). It includes understanding how societal discrimination, power, privilege and oppression impact the mental health of clients at the individual, community, and global levels. Social justice expands upon multiculturalism to encourage counselors to intervene at more systemic levels of oppression (Bemak & Chung, 2011; Chung & Bemak, 2012;

Ratts, 2009). As such, multiculturalism and social justice are ‘two sides of the same coin’ (Ratts, 2009).

The professional counseling and counselor education fields have a strong foundation in multiculturalism (Pedersen, 1988, 1991; Sue & Sue, 1990, 2016). The American Counseling Association (ACA) turned its focus to multiculturalism to address the growing need in society to counsel people from diverse ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds. This led to the creation of the Multicultural Counseling Competencies (Sue et al., 1992). The Multicultural Counseling Competencies served as a framework for counselors to understand the experiences of, and how to work towards providing more competent counseling to, clients from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (Sue et al., 1992). They served as a catalyst for a focus on diversity within the ACA’s code of ethics (2014) and the competencies published by the ACA division, ALGBTIC (Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling, 2009, 2012; Ratts et al., 2016). Lastly, they served as a framework for which counselor educators (which are a part of the ACA division, the Association for Counselor Educators and Supervisors) could continue to adjust their pedagogical practices to further train counselors to holistically counsel their clients from diverse backgrounds.

The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies

To reflect the counselor education field’s focus on multiculturalism, and, more recently, social justice, the American Counseling Association commissioned an update to the Multicultural Counseling Competencies (Sue et al., 1992). These were renamed the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) (Ratts et al., 2016). This update reflected the commitment of the counseling and counselor education fields to

incorporate social justice as a fundamental principle within all areas of their practice (Chang et al., 2010; Ratts, 2009). This update to the Multicultural Counseling Competencies expanded to include the intersections of racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, socioeconomic, age, religious, spiritual, and disability identities within counselor education pedagogy and counseling practice (Ratts et al., 2016). This study is largely situated within, and can be understood through, the framework presented within the MSJCC. As such, a more in-depth look at the MSJCC will follow.

The MSJCC are conceptually founded upon: the importance of understanding the nuances of multiculturalism and diversity on the counseling relationship, the necessity for recognizing how oppression negatively influences mental health and well-being (including understanding intersectionality of experiences), the location of experiences of individuals within their context and environment, and calls for the interaction of social justice and advocacy within all modalities of counseling (Ratts et al., 2016). The MSJCC also call for counselors to understand the effects of privilege and oppression, with an importance placed on intersectionality theory. The MSJCC provide a multicultural and social justice counseling praxis which highlights how power and oppression are located within each counselor and client, and how this interaction impacts the counseling relationship. Specifically, the MSJCC recognize that both counselors and clients hold various privileged and oppressed identities that can be salient in any given counseling interaction.

This praxis constitutes four quadrants in which power, privilege and oppression intersect in interactions between counselors and clients in regard to which identities of the counselor and client are most salient within any given interaction. The four quadrants

are as follows: privileged counselor-marginalized client, privileged counselor-privileged client, marginalized counselor-privileged client, and marginalized counselor-marginalized client. Each quadrant also comprises four domains which contribute to the interactions between the quadrants: counselor self-awareness, knowledge of clients' worldviews, the counseling relationship, and advocacy interventions; it is noted that a successful multicultural and social justice practice begin with the counselor's own self-awareness.

Multiculturalism, Social Justice, and Intersectionality within Counselor Education and Supervision

Since Crenshaw's (1989) conceptualization of intersectionality theory, the theory has become a social movement across disciplines and across the world (Carbado et al., 2013). This is also true for the field of counselor education, where social justice and intersectionality have become strong forces within the strive for multiculturalism in counselor education (Chan et al., 2018). Social justice has since been deemed the 'fifth-wave' in *both* counseling and counselor education (Ratts, 2009). As such, there has been a focus on social justice within ACES, as well as the ACA, to prepare future counselors to incorporate social justice along with multiculturalism as fundamental principles within all areas of their practice (Chang et al., 2010). Focusing on social justice within counselor education trains future counselors to acknowledge the impact that power, privilege, oppression, and intersectionality theory have on clients' lives, as well as the importance for counselors to expand beyond focusing on the individual to larger social contexts, including advocacy for and on behalf of clients (Chang et al., 2010). While the field of counselor education has embraced multiculturalism and social justice, many challenges remain in their successful implementation (Chan et al., 2018).

Oppression and Effects of Oppression

Understanding oppression and its effects are fundamental to multicultural and social justice counseling. Counseling literature exploring the effects of oppression on various groups of people with historically oppressed identities (such as racial, ethnic, sexual, affectional, gender, and class) have found various effects on mental health, such as: increased psychological distress (Sue et al., 2008; Szymanski, 2005), depressive and anxiety symptoms (Nadal et al., 2014), trauma symptoms (Helms et al., 2010), and rates of suicidality and self-harm (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007; Hatchel et al., 2019). It has thus been stated within the counseling literature that the effects of oppression are so ubiquitous and harmful to mental health that the majority of 'problems' presented to counselors are clients' experiences of oppression (Hanna et al., 2000).

Transgender Oppression

Society has socially, historically, politically and culturally constructed sex and gender categories into a rigid binary fixed at birth (male/female and man/woman). The gender categories of man/woman are the social creation of two categories in which one holds power over the other. Transgender and gender expansive people challenge the construction of the binary's very existence (Carrera et al., 2012). As such, the separation of society by gender lay the groundwork for transgender oppression: those who fall outside of the cisgender binary are heavily 'policed' by society for their transgressions against gender norms (Burdge, 2007). People within the transgender community are exposed to prejudice, transphobic comments, microaggressions, and overt and covert forms of discrimination (Nadal et al., 2010). Like other systems of oppression, these systems of transgender oppression work together to continue to reinforce the oppression

of transgender people while perpetuating the dominance of cisgender culture (Singh, et al., 2014).

This oppression and anti-trans stigma in society dehumanizes people who are transgender, resulting in a lack of family acceptance, a hostile political environment, and a culture of marginalization and invisibility (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2020a). For instance, almost two-thirds of states within the United States do not have laws against anti-transgender discrimination (Carmel & Erickson-Schroth, 2016). Further, the dehumanization of transgender people impedes the development of healthy assimilation of a transgender identity, such as by hiding one's identity to not lose employment or delaying transition (Austin, 2016; Grant et al., 2011). This further exacerbates the feeling of invisibility within the transgender and gender expansive communities.

This anti-transgender stigma leads to a denial of opportunity. Denying opportunity prevents people who are transgender from fully participating in society due to setbacks in education; employment discrimination; barriers for refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers; exclusion from health care and social services; housing discrimination; unequal policing and criminal justice system; and barriers to legal identification (Bradford et al., 2013; Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2020a). These combined effects of anti-trans stigma and denial of opportunity increase the risk of intimate partner violence and sexual assault, engagement in survival sex work, poverty and homelessness, and physical and mental health disparities; these risk factors are exacerbated by other systems of oppression such as racism and sexism (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2020a).

People who are transgender experience disproportionate rates of discrimination, harassment, violence, physical assault, and sexual assault compared to people who are cisgender and compared to people who identify as lesbian, gay and bisexual (Carmel & Erickson-Schroth, 2016; Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016). These experiences are even further exacerbated for people who are gender expansive. This is evidenced by research that shows that people who are gender expansive have increased incidences of discrimination, harassment, sexual abuse and traumatic events than transgender people whose identities fall within the binary (Lefevor et al., 2009). This is concerning since people with gender expansive identities make up about 25-35 percent of the transgender population (James et al., 2016).

Perhaps most devastating is the intersectionality between being transgender and a person of color, specifically for people who identify as African American and/or Black. For instance, African American transgender individuals experience the greatest impact of oppression (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016). Compared to the general population, transgender people of color are more than three times as likely to live in poverty, four times as likely to be unemployed, and Black trans women are sixty-three times more likely than the general population to be living with HIV (James et al., 2016). One out of three Black transgender youth attempt suicide (The Trevor Project, 2020a). And it does not stop there: the Human Rights Campaign Foundation (2019) has reported that Black transgender women are killed in greater numbers than white transgender women and transgender men. It was only in 2013 that the federal government began tracking anti-transgender hate crimes, so data before this year was unavailable (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2019). Since then, an average of about 22 transgender people

have been killed in the United States per year- almost all of them Black women (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2019). Estimates are likely to be much higher- as families, police and the media often misgender homicide victims or refuse to acknowledge their transgender and gender expansive identities (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2019).

Since this dissertation was completed during 2019-2020, data around the violence the transgender and gender expansive community will henceforth be reported. In 2019, 91 percent of the 22 transgender people who were murdered were Black women, 81 percent were under the age of 30, and 68 percent lived in the southern United States (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2019). In remembrance of the transgender people, the majority of whom are women, who have lost their lives due to transphobia, cissexism and other forms of oppression, the names of those who have been murdered for being transgender in 2019 are shared here: Dana Martin, Jazzaline Ware, Ashanti Carmon, Claire Legato, Muhlaysia Booker, Michelle ‘Tamika’ Washington, Paris Cameron, Chyndal Lindsey, Chanel Scurlock, Zoe Spears, Brooklyn Lindsey, Denali Berries Stuckey, Tracy Single, Kiki Fantroy, Bubba Walker, Pebbles Ladime “Dime” Doe, Jordan Cofer, Bailey Reeves, Bee Love Slater, Jamagio Jamar Berryman, Itali Marlow, and Briana “BB” Hill.

Unfortunately, 2020 was the deadliest recorded year on record for transgender and gender non-conforming people who were fatally shot or died by other violent means (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2020b). Similarly to data in 2019, the majority of these fatalities were Black and Latinx transgender women. In remembrance of those that have lost their lives, their names are reported here: Dustin Parker, Neulisa Luciano Ruiz,

Yami Méndez Arocho, Scott/Scottylynn Devore, Mokina Diamond, Lexi, Johanna Metzger, Serena Angelique Velázquez Ramos, Layla Pelaez Sánchez, Penélope Díaz Ramírez, Nina Pop, Helle Jae O-Regan, Tony McDage, Dominique “Rem’mie Fells, Riah Milton, Jayne Thompson, Selena Reyes-Hernandez, Brian “Egypt’ Powers, Brayal Stone, Merci Mack, Shaki Peters, Bree Black, Summer Taylor, Marilyn Cazares, Dior H Ova, Queasha D Hardy, Aja Raquell Rhone-Spears, Lea Rayshon Daye, Kee Sam, Aerrion Burnett, Mia Green, Michelle Michellyn Ramos Vargas, Felycyia Harris, Brooklyn Deshuna, Sara Blackwood, Angel Unique, Skylar Heath, Yunieski Carey Herrera, Asia Jynae Foster, Chae’Meshia Simms, Kimberly Fial, Jaheim Pugh Jaheim Barbie, Courtyney “Eshay” Key, and Alexandria Winchester.

The enormous incidences of discrimination, marginalization, and violence from all levels of society take their toll on the mental health of people with transgender and gender expansive identities. Heartbreakingly, the National Transgender Discrimination Survey found that 41 percent of the 6,400 transgender people that responded have attempted suicide compared to 1.6 percent of the general population at the time (Grant et al., 2011). In their follow-up, the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey found that 40 percent of their almost 28,000 transgender respondents had attempted suicide; this is nine times the general population rate of 4.6 percent (James et al., 2016). Compared to five percent of the general population, 39 percent of respondents also reported psychological distress; for transgender people with disabilities the rate of suicide attempts and psychological distress jump to 54 and 59 percent respectively (James et al., 2016).

The results from these surveys are consistent with other studies that have documented a high incidence of psychological distress, suicidality, depression, and

anxiety among the transgender and gender expansive populations due to their experiences of oppression and violence (Bariola et al., 2015; Bauer et al., 2013; Bockting et al., 2013; Clements-Nolle et al., 2006; Goldblum et al., 2012; Haas et al., 2014; James et al., 2016; Nuttbrock et al., 2014). Genderqueer individuals have even higher rates of anxiety, depression, psychological distress, suicide attempts and eating concerns than transgender and cisgender people within the binary (James et al., 2016; Lefevor et al., 2009). There is evidence that having family support and support within the Sexual, Affectional, Intersex, and Gender Expansive (SAIGE) community (‘collective self-esteem’) can improve the psychological functioning and resilience of transgender and gender expansive adults (Bariola et al., 2015; Sánchez & Vilain, 2009).

Youth Oppression

Understanding youth oppression is also necessary to contextualize the experiences of TGEY in this study. ‘Youth’ is a socially constructed identity. Like all socially constructed identities, society’s understanding of youth is historically, culturally, politically, and socially constructed. The social categorizations of youth/adult represent yet another binary that serves to reinforce systems of power and oppression (Walkerdine, 1984). Within the last few decades, recognizing youth oppression (and adultism) has become an important component within the social justice movements, however (DeJong & Love, 2015). Youth oppression has been defined as:

the systematic subordination of younger people as a targeted group, who have relatively little opportunity to exercise social power ... through restricted access to the goods, services, and privileges of society, and denial of access to

participation in the economic and political life of society (DeJong & Love, 2013, p. 536).

Like other forms of oppression, youth oppression is perpetuated through prejudice, discrimination, beliefs, and culture to create barriers to resources and power within society. Adultism is the mechanism of privilege which continues to reinforce this differential power structure; adults believe that due to their age they are more superior in thinking and make decisions for youth without their participation, deny access to resources, decide components of mainstream education, and perpetuate the notion that youth are dependent on adults (Bell, 1995; DeJong & Love, 2015).

While other historically oppressed socially constructed identities have extensive research, the normalization of youth oppression is so prevalent that far less research exists (Adams et al., 2010). Studies that do address the effects of youth oppression look at multiple intersecting layers of oppression (such as SAIGE youth, youth of color, youth experiencing homelessness, etc.); it would be near-impossible to isolate youth oppression from other forms of oppression based on intersectionality.

Oppression's Impact on the Mental Health of Transgender and Gender Expansive Youth

TGEY experience both transgender oppression and youth oppression simultaneously. Due to the oppression they experience, TGEY show increased rates of psychological distress, anxiety, depression, suicidality and self-harm due to peer victimization, social ostracization, and feeling unsafe at school (Aitken et al., 2016; Clark et al., 2014; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007; Hatchel et al., 2019; Holt et al., 2016; Kelleher, 2009; Skagerberg et al., 2013; Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018). TGEY can also struggle with stress, gender dysphoria, eating disorders, PTSD, addictions, Bipolar

Disorder, and Dissociative Identity Disorder (Smith et al., 2014). Transgender and gender expansive young people are more than four times as likely to experience significant depressive symptoms as compared to their peers (Clark et al., 2014). There is also some evidence that psychological distress such as depression and suicidality increase with the age of TGEY (de Vries et al., 2011; Holt et al., 2016). These mental health disparities in TGEY can be explained through the Minority Stress Model, which recognizes that these mental health disparities are the results of oppressive forces in society (Meyer, 2003; Sue, 2010).

Various societal factors can negatively impact the mental health of TGEY. For instance, many TGEY experience family rejection such as being made to feel bad about their identities; hearing negative comments about SAIGE people; and being mocked, taunted, harassed, ignored, abused, ‘disowned’ or kicked out (Grant et al., 2011; Grossman et al., 2005; Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2018; Smith et al., 2014). This family rejection can increase the risk of poor mental health, substance use, and suicide attempts for TGEY (Grossman et al., 2005). Additionally, combinations of family rejection, poverty, homophobia, and transphobia can propel gay and TGEY of color into homelessness (Reck, 2009).

TGEY also experience rejection, bullying, harassment, physical and sexual violence, and victimization from peers and teachers at school (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 2009, 2019; Smith et al., 2014; Wyss, 2004). Poor peer relations and social isolation at school, such as bullying, have been one of the greatest predictors of increased mental health struggles with this population (de Vries et al., 2016; Yadegarfar et al., 2014). These negative experiences can lead to: PTSD (Smith et al., 2014),

increased depression and suicidal ideation in transgender youth of color (Hatchel et al., 2019), a greater likelihood for TGEY of color from low socioeconomic status to abuse drugs than their white TGEY peers (Hatchel & Marx, 2018), low self-esteem (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 2009, 2019), depression, self-destructive behaviors (self-harming), drug abuse, dropping out of school, unsafe sex, suicidality, a desire to hide one's identity, and a desire to 'go back into the closet' (Smith et al., 2014; Wyss, 2004).

Outside of school, TGEY experience abuse, including verbal, physical and harassment on the street, physical assaults, rejection, negative reactions to their gender identity, adultism, isolation, discrimination, invisibility, police and community harassment, sexualization, unwanted sexual comments and looks, sexual attacks, rape and commodification (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2018; Reck, 2009; Singh et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2014). These experiences are often worse for TGEY of color, who sit at the intersections of adultism, racism, and transphobia (Reck, 2009; Singh et al., 2014). Other threats to the well-being and resilience of TGEY include difficulty accessing healthcare, feeling emotionally and socially isolated, employment discrimination, limited financial resources, and gender policing (Singh et al., 2014).

Resiliency

While it is important to understand the impacts of oppression on the mental health of TGEY, it is also equally important to explore the resiliency of TGEY. TGEY who are supported in their identities have decreased rates of depression, anxiety, behavioral

concerns and other symptoms (Ehrensaft, 2013; Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018). They also have an increase in happiness, contentment, and well-being (Ehrensaft, 2013).

Having supportive families has been shown to reduce TGEY's depression, distress, feelings of hopelessness, feeling like a burden, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts; increase their self-esteem and resilience; lead to better housing and reducing homelessness; reduce substance use; improve economic security and health; reduce psychological distress; increase access to mental health professionals, (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2018; James et al., 2016; Mustanski & Liu, 2013; Olson et al., 2016; Simons et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2014; Travers et al., 2012). TGEY that experience a sense of belongingness at school have decreased drug use, indicating the importance of an affirming and supportive school environment that respects the identities of TGEY in schools (Hatchel & Marx, 2018). Having a connection to web resources and being involved in advocacy efforts can also help TGEY feel connected and improve their resiliency (Smith et al., 2014). Studies for transgender people within the binary have found that being connected to other transgender people was related to less fearfulness, less suicidality and more comfort (Testa et al., 2014).

For TGEY of color, affirmative spaces that make space for their intersecting identities help increase their resiliency. Being able to define their own gender, having supportive education systems, and connections to transaffirming communities are some of the key factors in resiliency for TGEY of color (Singh, 2013; Singh et al., 2014). Having a space to address adultism and name adultism experiences has also been noted as a resilience strategy for TGEY of color (Singh, 2013). Trans youth of color feel resiliency

in their gender identities when they are able to find their place within the SAIGE youth community and use social media as well (Singh, 2013).

Additionally, empirical studies comparing TGEY who are supported in their transition with their cisgender peers show that psychopathology is not inherent in this population (Durwood et al., 2017; Ehrensaft, 2013; Olson et al., 2016). In a study comparing socially transitioned children to age-and-gender matched controls and siblings of the youth, the socially transitioned TGEY showed normative rates of depression and higher self-worth (Durwood et al., 2017). While research is scarce on the outcomes of TGEY who have socially transitioned, the preliminary evidence suggests positive mental health outcomes for TGEY who have socially transitioned and have supportive parents and caregivers (Durwood et al., 2017; Ehrensaft, 2013;). These studies show that poor mental health is not inevitable in this population and that psychopathology is often due to societal oppression rather than anything internal to the individual (Olson et al., 2016).

Gender Identity Development of Transgender and Gender Expansive Youth

Young adults, children, and adolescents are more likely to identify as transgender and gender expansive in the United States than previous generations (Flores et al., 2016; GLAAD, 2017). This increase in representation is likely due to the growing acceptance of transgender and gender expansive people within the United States (GLAAD, 2017), Understanding how TGEY experience their gender identities with consideration to various oppressive forces in their lives will provide increased knowledge about gender identities with this population. While more literature is needed on the gender identities and experiences of TGEY within their own words, there is some literature within the counseling and related fields about the gender identity development of this population.

Historically, gender identity has been conflated with one's sex assigned at birth, usually put into the binary category of male/female (Carrera et al., 2012; Drescher, 2010). As more literature around gender identity emerges within the psychological sciences and related fields, there is an increased understanding that a person's gender identity is complex, fluid, socially constructed, and exists on a continuum outside of the physical constraints imposed in society by the binary (Carrera et al., 2012; Nagoshi & Burzuzy, 2010). A person's gender identity develops through a multifaceted process consisting of biological factors (such as hormones and primary and secondary sex characteristics), the brain, the mind, culture (values, laws, ethics, etc.) and socialization (home, school, communities) (Ehrensaft, 2017). Transgender and gender expansive identities have existed for thousands of years and vary significantly by culture (Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018). For instance, there is the term 'hijra' in South Asian cultures which refers to a third gender (neither completely male or female) (Nanda, 1986) and the term 'two-spirit' used by many Native American cultures to describe a gender that falls outside of the western gender binary (Leland, 2009).

What is Known and Gaps

As children grow up, they continue to construct and reconstruct how they understand their gender, such as understanding their gender identity (knowing one's gender as boy, girl, both, neither, or any combination thereof) and how they 'perform' their gender (clothes, who they choose to hang out with, activities, etc.) (Ehrensaft, 2017). While many children explore their gender identity, a small number (not exactly known) will be persistent, insistent, and consistent into adolescents and adulthood in their assertions that their gender is not what was assigned at birth and/or with the cultural

expectations of their gender in society (Ehrensaft, 2011). While a person can realize they are transgender and gender expansive at any age, young transgender children have shown signs as early as the first and second year of life, such as by asserting that they are a different gender (Ehrensaft, 2014; Pleak, 2009). Typically, once a child has started puberty between ages 10-13, there is growing consensus that these adolescents will persist into adulthood as transgender and/or gender expansive (Pleak, 2009). Lastly, there is some indication that gender expansive gender identities develop slightly later in life and are less understood by society than children who identify as transgender within the binary (Factor & Rothblum, 2008). While some of these pieces of gender identity development are known, much of what is known comes from the view of clinicians who are working with TGEY; more research is needed to understand their gender identity, how they navigate their gender identity with their additional intersecting identities, and the meaning they make from these experience to increase counselors' collective knowledge and awareness of the experience of TGEY.

Transaffirmative and Transnegative Approaches to Counseling

A transaffirmative approach with TGEY is recommended as the best counseling approach within the counseling and related fields. This includes the need for clinicians to recognize that the history of stigmatizing and pathologizing gender identities has led to distrust of mental health professionals or the view that they are 'gatekeepers' instead of advocates or allies (Bess & Stabb, 2009; Bockting et al., 2006; Grant et al., 2011; Lev, 2004). A transaffirmative approach with TGEY and transgender and gender expansive adults consists of a variety of components, some of which will be described in the subsequent paragraphs.

Transaffirmative care includes being knowledgeable of the psychosocial concerns, gender milestones, and the context of the lives of transgender and gender expansive people within a heteronormative society (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). When counseling this population, it is important to use gender inclusive language and language that reflects the client's own experiences (their name, pronouns, words for describing their own gender, etc.) (Benson, 2013; Bockting et al., 2006; Collazo et al., 2013; Ehrensaft, 2017; Singh et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2014). A transaffirmative approach also includes taking a systemic approach to counseling, such as locating 'pathology' within society's response to transgender and gender expansive individuals instead of within gender identity itself (Edwards-Leeper et al., 2016; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; World Professional Association for Transgender Health, 2012). This also includes addressing any co-occurring mental health concerns resulting from oppression (World Professional Association for Transgender Health, 2012), helping clients realize how society's gender constructs and transgender oppression contribute to their vulnerability and health status (Grossman et al., 2005; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006), and helping clients to cope with living within an oppressive culture (Grossman et al., 2005; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Ross et al., 2007).

A transaffirmative approach also includes taking on the role of an advocate instead of gatekeeper, such as helping empower clients to tell their own stories and advocating to remove systemic barriers (Bess & Stabb, 2009; Collazo et al., 2013; Israel et al., 2008; McCullough et al., 2017). Helping build clients' resilience (such as developing a positive self-image, a positive sense of self, and ways to cope with conflicts, feelings of hopelessness, etc.) is another part of this approach (Grossman & D'Augelli,

2006; Singh et al., 2014). While a transaffirmative approach includes specific aspects related to gender identity, it is important to treat the whole person and not just their gender identity (Smith et al., 2014). Lastly, literature in the counseling and related fields have published specific guidelines for supporting transgender and gender expansive people of color (Chang & Singh, 2016).

Building a safe and trusting therapeutic relationship emphasizing confidentiality is also important in transaffirmative care (Bockting et al., 2006; Collazo et al., 2013). This can allow clients the freedom to explore their gender (Edwards-Leeper et al., 2016; Ehrensaft, 2012, 2013;), which includes exploring goals that support the unique needs of each client — including aspects of social, medical and legal transitioning (Bockting et al., 2006; Collazo et al., 2013; Ehrensaft, 2017; Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018; World Professional Association for Transgender Health, 2012).

Essentially, a transnegative approach to counseling is the opposite of everything described above. Transnegative approaches to counseling consist of actions such as: invalidating a client's gender identity, using the incorrect pronouns, an insensitivity to intersectionality, and lack of knowledge of the historical, political, social, cultural and medical aspects of their lives (McCullough et al., 2017). Transnegative approaches can include counselors telling clients that being transgender is 'not real' or that being transgender results from childhood trauma (Smith et al., 2014). Additionally, transnegative approaches include the need for transgender and gender expansive clients to educate their therapists, such as about various language and terminology about their identities (Bockting et al., 2004).

Training in Transaffirmative Approaches in Counselor Education

Counselor education programs can continue to perpetuate the dominant culture in the United States (cissexism, heterosexism, etc.), which can lead to well-intentioned counselors continuing to perpetuate microaggressions towards members of the SAIGE community (Smith et al., 2012). People who identify as men, have less personal familiarity with transgender and gender expansive people, less training in counseling with this population, and less perceived multicultural counseling competence have increased anti-trans attitudes; this results in a more unfavorable perception of transgender and gender expansive clients (Nisley, 2010). A part of this lack of training originates in many counselor education and supervision programs. For instance, all of the participants in a study looking at cisgender counselors who worked with transgender and gender expansive people, noted an absence in their graduate training programs on working with transgender and gender expansive clients; participants in this study also discussed the need for this to be a required area of training in all counselor education programs (Salpietro et al., 2019). These results are consistent with other studies where counselors and school counselors have reported no training or familiarity for working with transgender and gender expansive clients in their graduate training programs (Abreu et al., 2020; Whitman & Han, 2017). Based on this literature and the aforementioned literature on the perpetuation of transnegative approaches in counseling, it can be safe to assume that a majority of counselor education programs are not providing adequate training to their students on how to provide transaffirmative counseling.

Conclusion

The counseling and counselor education fields have long been committed to increasing the multicultural and social justice counseling competencies within the profession to serve clients from various diverse cultural, ethnic and identity backgrounds. With this increased focus on multiculturalism and social justice within counseling and counselor education, there has been a large increase in the literature on transgender and gender expansive topics. Much of this literature has focused on the effects of oppression on this population, such as the disproportionate mental and behavioral health concerns. Although there is a burgeoning interest in transgender and gender expansive people in the counseling and related fields, there continues to be a general lack of knowledge and understanding about transgender and gender expansive topics among counselors. Additionally, while a transaffirmative approach has been seen as the best approach for providing counseling to this population, counselors and related mental health professionals continue to perpetuate transnegative approaches with this population. This can be indicative of some counselor education programs failing to adequately train future counselors to meet the needs of this population. More literature is needed to address the dearth of literature on how transgender and gender expansive people experience their gender identities, especially with TGEY. By sharing the experiences of TGEY, including how they experience their gender identity, how they navigate their intersecting identities, and how these experiences are historically, culturally, socially, and politically situated, counselor educators can more adequately prepare future counselors to increase their multicultural and social justice competence and increase their understanding of the experiences of TGEY. This need for increased knowledge and understanding by

counselors on transgender and gender expansive topics is noted by transgender and gender expansive adults and youth in the literature.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore how transgender and gender expansive youth (TGEY) experienced their gender identity, navigated the intersections between their gender identity and additional identities, and the meaning they made from these experiences using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). IPA was selected due to its idiographic nature and natural alignment with multiculturalism and social justice. This chapter provides an overview of ontological and epistemological foundations, theoretical perspectives, the research questions, researcher positionality, the methodology and methods, trustworthiness procedures, and ethical considerations.

Ontological and Epistemological Considerations

This study was grounded within a relativist and historical realist ontology that informed the study's subjective, interpretative and social constructionist epistemology which is idiographic in nature (Crotty, 1998; Miller et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Relativism asserts that knowledge itself is not free from biases or values, there is no 'one' truth, and it is socially constructed. As such, the researcher understood that there was no one 'truth' or essence of how TGEY experience their gender identities, their identities are socially constructed, and that the knowledge of their experiences are shaped by their values and biases. This is especially important considering the tendency for researchers to

conglomerate the experiences of people who are transgender and gender expansive, contributing to the invisibility of TGEY (Chan & Farmer, 2017). Historical realism honors the influence of culture, history, politics and identities on the construction of knowledge which is constantly changing and evolving. In the context of this study, historical realism was used to understand that how TGEY experienced their gender identities was influenced by culture, history, politics, and intersectional identities within this given point of time. Further, historical realism provided the context by which the researcher and participants could recognize the fluid, historical, cultural and political nature of gender identities and how this influenced their understanding of their gender identities in that moment in time. In sum, combining relativism with historical realism allowed for the exploration of how culture, history, politics and identities influenced how TGEY understood and interpreted their gender identities and the meaning they made from their identities during this study.

Subjective epistemologies posit that the world does not exist independently of one's knowledge of it, multiple 'realities' exist, and that the researcher cannot be separated from the research (Crotty, 1998). Interpretivism and social constructionism are sub-categories of subjectivism and were the two guiding epistemologies for this study. Interpretivism brings the impact social forces have on the experiences of participants to the forefront by interpreting the potential contextual factors that have impacted the participants' experiences. As such, the purpose of this study was to understand the subjective and lived experiences of how TGEY experienced their gender identities and how they interpreted their experiences based on the various social forces and contextual factors present in their lives. Additionally, due to the double-hermeneutic approach of

IPA, the researcher also interpreted the participants' interpretations through further contextualization in the data analysis phase. The actual research findings were interpretations of the participants' subjective interpretations of how they experienced their gender identity, additional identities, and meanings made situated within various potential contextual factors that shaped their experiences. Social constructionism posits that the phenomenon being studied is socially constructed: the experiences of participants have been socially embedded and constructed within specific political, social, historical and cultural factors. Additionally, participants and the researcher socially constructed the research findings together. Social constructionism in the context of this study recognized that how TGEY experienced their gender identities had been socially embedded and constructed based on their specific political, social, historical and contextual factors.

Combined, the ontological and epistemological considerations for this study provided the subjective exploration of how TGEY experienced their gender identities and how they interpreted these experiences, while allowing space for understanding how these experiences and interpretations had been influenced by contextual factors. These ontological and epistemological considerations also recognized that the researcher had influence over this process. For instance, the researcher did not believe that they could be fully objective and removed from the research process. The researcher, as is the nature in IPA research, socially constructed the findings with the participants as well as provided additional interpretations and contextualizations of their experiences through the lenses of current cultural, historical, political and social factors. It is also assumed in IPA research that the research and findings will be influenced by the researcher's positionality, interpretation, and interactions with participants.

Theoretical Considerations

The theoretical foundations of this study were grounded within interpretivism, critical theory, and intersectionality as these fit naturally within IPA methodology (Chan & Farmer, 2017; Miller et al., 2018). An interpretivist paradigm, sometimes referred to as constructivism, asserts that every individual person constructs their own reality and truth. This is opposed to a positivist paradigm which asserts a singular, objective truth to be discovered, free from human interpretation, interaction and context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998). A constructivist approach asserts that there are multiple interpretations of truth and reality. As such, this study explored the individual ‘truths’ of each participant, understanding their experiences, and how they have made meaning from these experiences. It also explored how participants’ interpreted those meanings at the time of the study and to the degree to which they could express their understanding of those experiences. This gave space for each participant’s own voice as well as for exploring the contextual factors influencing their experiences.

Critical theory espouses that knowledge is unable to be separated from biases, and, as such, biases should be articulated clearly throughout the process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998;). These ‘biases’ can include how language is constructed, the influence of power, privilege, and oppression on people’s lives, as well as how cultural and contextual factors influence knowledge. Through the double-hermeneutic process of IPA, the researcher specifically looked at how participants used language. Additionally, the researcher explored the influence of power, privilege, and oppression on the lives of the participants, and how various contextual factors influenced their experiences and interpretations of their experiences. The researcher clearly articulated the biases of this

study, such as looking at the impact of society's gendered, classist, heteronormative, cissexist, racist, and sexist culture on the lives of participants and the researcher. Lastly, these interpretations of knowledge and contextual factors were further framed within intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) to provide a more in-depth framework of how power, privilege and oppression influenced the participants' lives.

Intersectionality is the phenomenon in which an individual who holds two or more oppressed identities (i.e., transgender and youth) experiences oppression such that it is impossible to separate out which aspects of one's identity are the cause of the oppression (Ratts et al., 2016). Intersectionality theory also explores the interaction of multiple privileged and oppressed identities and how these identities impact the way in which people experience privilege and oppression in the world (Bowleg, 2012; Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality theory comprises six main components: power, complexity, social inequality, social context, social justice, and relationality (Collins & Bilge, 2016). This wide-angle approach to understanding identities pays homage to the interconnectedness and social construction of various identities that constellate a person's experiences. As such, one cannot look at the effects of oppression, and intersectionality of identities, without understanding the relationship these identities have to societal power structures that continue to reinforce systemic structures that perpetuate oppression. Therefore, intersectionality theory was a strong undercurrent to this research. From the interviews with the participants to the analysis of the data, the researcher explored the various privileged and oppressed identities of the participants, their experiences with privilege and oppression, the relationship their identities had to power structures and their worldview, as well as other contextualizations.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA was founded by Jonathan Smith as an extension of traditional phenomenology (Miller et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009). It is grounded in traditional phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography to focus on existential meaning, the interaction between participants' experiences and context, and the historical, contextual and political forces on participants' experiences and lives (Miller et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009). While traditional phenomenology follows a constructivist and interpretivist epistemology (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018), the ontology of IPA is realism, and the epistemology is constructionism (Hays & Wood, 2011). These distinctions between traditional phenomenology and IPA are important for understanding the methods and the role of the researcher in this study.

Unlike phenomenology, which converges participants' experiences into one 'essence' of the phenomenon (Hays & Wood, 2011), IPA follows an idiographic and double-hermeneutic approach (Smith et al., 2009). This allows for converging and diverging themes to be presented, including the meaning participants made of their experiences, and sets IPA apart from other phenomenological approaches (Miller et al., 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). The double-hermeneutic process enables the researcher to make meaning from participants' experiences, including offering alternative conclusions, and contextualizing the participants' narratives within historical, social, political, and cultural factors (Miller et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009).

IPA was chosen over traditional phenomenological approaches because of its idiographic and double-hermeneutic approach, which are ideal for research within the TGEY community (Chan & Farmer, 2017). Since the lives of TGEY are complex,

diverse, and nuanced, IPA allowed for both the similarities and differences in themes to be presented instead of collapsing them into the similarities in experiences. This approach therefore helped to avoid the over-generalization of experiences that can often occur within research with the SAIGE community. IPA also positioned the voice of each participant at the forefront and let participants define their experiences in their own words (Singh et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2009). The researcher provided further contextualization of the participants' experiences within larger political, social, cultural and historical contexts. This created a richer, more in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences by exploring diversity and their relationship to life narratives through the lenses of interpretivism, critical theory, and intersectionality theory (Chan & Farmer, 2017; Miller et al., 2018). As such, IPA naturally situates within multicultural and social justice frameworks by exploring the complexities between the participants' experiences, and the ways that power, privilege and oppression shaped their lives.

Since there are no known studies of how TGEY experience their gender identities in their own words to date, this study aimed to explore how TGEY experienced their gender identity, additional identities, and the meaning they made from these experiences in their own words. Further, this study explored how the experiences of TGEY were situated within larger social, historical, cultural, and political contexts, with a focus on the interplay of power, privilege, and oppression. Together, the findings of this study contribute to an increased understanding of the lives and experiences of TGEY in their own words.

Research Questions

There was one primary research question and two sub-research questions for this study:

- Q1 How do transgender and gender expansive youth experience their gender identity?
- SQ1 How do transgender and gender expansive youth experience their gender identity in relation to their intersecting identities?
- SQ2 How do youth who identify within transgender and gender expansive identities make meaning of their experiences, their identities, and their experiences within their identities?

Methods

Sampling and Recruitment

Purposeful and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit TGEY who met the inclusion criteria for this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Due to the in-depth and idiographic nature of IPA, sample sizes are recommended to be between five to ten participants, who are relatively homogeneous in nature (Miller et al., 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). As such, the researcher aimed for about ten participants. Participants were recruited with purposeful sampling from local high schools and middle schools, specific physical and mental health agencies that work with TGEY, and community groups for TGEY within the state of Colorado, such as The TRUE Clinic, The Transgender Center of the Rockies, Poudre School District, Queer Asterisk, The Fort Collins Therapist Network, Rainbow Alley, Out Boulder, Splash, PFLAG, and various Facebook groups for mental health professionals and caregivers of gender expansive children in Colorado.

Flyers were disseminated to teachers, staff, community leaders, mental health professionals, and medical professionals about the study. The flyers included the following: (a) information about the study, (b) the purpose of the study, (c) the inclusion

criteria for the participants, (d) an encouragement for TGEY with additional oppressed identities to participate in the study (i.e., racial, ethnic, class, religious, spiritual, ability, etc.), (e) the Institutional Review Board approval number, (f) the contact information for the researcher, (g) and a specific link and information for how the potential participants could safely contact the researcher. This flyer is included in Appendix A. The researcher also asked participants to share the study with any TGEY with whom they knew to continue to recruit for the study with snowball sampling.

Setting

The individual interviews for this study were conducted via Zoom, with the researcher and participants' in their respective homes. Due to COVID-19, in-person interviews were unable to occur as originally planned. All individual interviews were audio recorded. The researcher spoke with each of the participants about interviewing in a space that would ensure their confidentiality during the interview process.

Participants

There were three primary inclusion criteria for this study: (1) the participant was between the ages of 13 and 17; (2) they identified within the transgender and gender expansive gender identities (such as but not limited to: transgender, gender expansive, genderfluid, genderqueer, nonbinary, gender nonconforming, demi-girl, demi-boy, agender, and bigender); and (3) they could identify an adult they trusted to be present for the consent process for the study. Teenagers within a similar age group and educational experience were chosen to adhere to the homogenous nature of IPA. (Miller et al., 2018). Although this study primarily focused on the lived experiences of TGEY, youth within this study may also have had additional oppressed identities such as identifying as a

person of color or within additional aspects of the broader gender, affectional, and romantically diverse communities. In order to not continue to perpetuate a monocultural lens, as well as align with methodological practices of IPA, participants with varying intersecting identities were sought through purposeful and snowball sampling.

Data Collection

The primary method of data collection in IPA is through the use of two, 90-minute open-ended in-person individual interviews (Miller et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009). While in-person interviews were originally planned upon as the method of data collection, due to COVID-19 interviews were all conducted over Zoom. Open-ended interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol enabled participants to freely respond and lead the discussion instead of following a more structured protocol. Additionally, participants were told they could decline to answer any question during the interview process. The open-ended individual interview questions are found in Appendix B.

Each open-ended interview was audio-recorded on two digital recording devices and transcribed verbatim. The audio recordings were immediately downloaded from Zoom onto the researcher's desktop upon completion of the interview. The audio file was then uploaded to the OtterAI online transcribing platform and subsequently deleted from the researcher's computer. The audio files were stored in OtterAI with a pseudonym only. The primary researcher (and not the second coder) was the only person that had access to any documents or keys linking the actual names of participants with the pseudonyms.

Potential participants contacted the researcher through the number provided on the recruitment flyer. The researcher then provided additional details of the study and

answered any questions the potential participants had. Then, the researcher discussed the potential participant's status so that the potential participant and researcher could agree on a plan for the potential participant to assent to the study safely. Consent, for this study, utilized *in loco parentis*, in which a trusted adult was present for the assent process. This could have included, but was not limited to, one of the participants' parents and/or caregivers. As such, the researcher and potential participant identified a trusted adult that the TEGY wanted present for the assent process. The potential participants and the researcher then selected a mutually agreed upon time to meet. Before the first meeting, the researcher emailed the assent documents, a link to the meeting, and any information about participating in the study. At this first meeting, the assent documents were completed with the trusted adult present. This was then emailed to the researcher; signatures were verified before data collection began. After the completion of the assent documents the trusted adult left, except for two participants' whom were participating from residential treatment center. Those participants needed a staff member in the same room for safety. The staff member was bound by HIPAA and the participants assented to their presence. Then participants completed a demographics questionnaire, which asked for the following: (a) first name, (b) age, (c) gender identity, (d) pronouns, (e) racial and ethnic identity, (f) sexual/affectional/romantic identity, (g) a pseudonym, (h) socioeconomic status, (i) abilities and disabilities, and (h) any additional identities the youth wanted the researcher to know. All of these had blanks for participants to write in their responses in their own words. Participants were told they could decline to answer any demographics information. The demographics questionnaire is in Appendix C. Either the researcher shared their screen and completed the form with the participants, or the

participants emailed the form back to the researcher, depending on available technology. Then, the participant and researcher began the first interview. If possible, the participant and researcher agreed on a date and time for the second interview at the end of the first or communicated via text about the next interview day and time.

As soon after the interview as possible, the researcher stored the assent key in a different folder from the demographics form. The demographics form used the self-selected pseudonym only. A separate document with a 'key' linking the pseudonym to the participant's real name was kept in a separate folder from all the other documents. The paper demographics forms and assent forms will be printed out and stored in the Research Advisor's office in a locked cabinet when in-person capabilities can happen.

Data Analysis

Since IPA is an iterative process, both data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously (Smith et al., 2009). Data analysis processes were followed based on those recommended by Smith et al., (2009): reading and re-reading, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connections across emergent themes, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns across cases. To increase credibility of the research findings, the researcher and another person external to this study (identified above as the second coder) both analyzed the data. The two coders coded separately and met periodically throughout the data analysis process to develop the codebook and reach consensus of codes that might initially differ.

During the first part of data analysis, the coders fully read through each individual transcript before making any notations. This way, each coder was immersed into the nuances of each participant and their story. Through this *initial reading*, the coders paid

attention to participants' individual language, style of communication, worldview, behaviors, feelings, and beliefs. The researcher then recorded in their bridling journal any powerful recollections and the most striking components of the interview. Through this process, the coders also gained more understanding of the structure of the interview, got a feel for the rapport of the interview, noticed how trust and rapport changed throughout the interview, and noticed any contradictions within the narrative.

Next, the coders engaged in *initial noting*. During this process, the coders independently went through the transcript line by line, making comments and color-coding the text based on the descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual aspects of the narrative. (Miles et al., 2014). *Descriptive* comments highlighted content that mattered to the participant, such as the key objects, experiences, events, people and emotions within a participant's account. These were changed to blue ink in the word documents. *Linguistic* comments explored the specific ways in which participants used language, such as words and phrases within their narratives. This includes the participant's use of metaphor, pauses, laughter, repetition, tone, degree of fluency, and pronoun use. These were coded in green ink. *Conceptual* comments explored more conceptual components of the participant's narrative, such as cultural, historical, political, and social factors and also included any of the researcher's own questions, ponderings, or reactions. These were coded in purple ink. It is important to note that each transcript and each case was analyzed independently from other cases; the coders bracketed any previous codes and interpretations during this part of the data analysis process.

After the line-by-line coding, the coders then separately started to *develop emergent themes* for each individual case (i.e. participant), in which the patterns of

experiences were written in the margins of the transcripts through the use of the 'comments' feature in the Word documents. After this process was completed, the themes were added into a codebook chronologically. The themes represented the participants' original words and thoughts to ensure that the themes and interpretations continued to stay grounded within participants' experiences. This was codebook one; each transcript for each participant had a codebook one. The coders then started to *search for connections across emerging themes* in each individuals' narrative. The first part of this process is called *abstraction*, in which similar themes will be grouped together to develop a sense of a 'subordinate' theme for that grouping. *Subsumation* is the process by which an emergent theme becomes the subordinate theme, which helps stay true to participant's language. Another part of this process was to look for relationships among themes that are contrary, called *polarization*. This was codebook two; each transcript for each participant had a codebook two.

The aforementioned coding processes occurred simultaneously through the first and second individual interviews during data collection. This iterative process helped the coders immerse in the participants' themes and inform the second interview. The researchers would share reactions, themes and possible ideas for follow-up questions before the second interview. Then, after the second coding process was completed, the researchers worked on combining both codebook number twos from each participant. This process followed a similar process to searching for connections across themes. This codebook was called codebook three; each participant had a codebook three. At this time, the two coders met together and compared their codebook threes for each participant. Once consensus had been reached, the researcher then met with the

participants to elicit their feedback during the member-checking phase. The researcher shared their screen and read the final codebooks with each participant. The participants were told they could move, change or delete anything, working with the researcher in a collaborative process to finalize their narratives. Together the participants and researcher created an updated codebook three. Once this process was completed for each participant, the researcher (and other coder) moved into the second phase of data analysis.

This second phase is called *moving onto the next case* (i.e. participant). In this last part of the data analysis, the coders looked for *patterns across the cases*, moving into more of a double-hermeneutic process. All of the subordinate and emergent themes from each individual participant in codebook three (from both interviews and member-checking process) were compared, while still maintaining individual differences. In this process, the coders looked for how themes related to one another, how explained one another, and searched for differences and similarities among the various themes. The coders then moved towards re-organizing the chunks of data into themes and patterns, including interpretations and possible meanings of the themes and patterns. They began to contextualize these experiences within societal, cultural, political, and historical frameworks. After this codebook had been created, both coders met together to reach consensus of the codes.

Development of a Structure for the Data

The combined data was organized in multiple codebooks throughout this iterative process during the data analysis. The first codebook occurred during the third step of writing all of the emerging themes chronologically for each individual transcript. The second codebook was where the re-organized themes were grouped based on similarities

and the relationships between them. This second codebook was created for each transcript; after both transcripts were analyzed for each participant, the coders created a third codebook that organized all of the emergent themes for each individual participant. Next, the fourth codebook captured the convergent and divergent themes among cases. In order to best organize the large amount of data, the researchers color coded each participants' themes and quotes in one color. Each superordinate theme and sub-themes had a rainbow of participant themes and quotes within them, making it easy to see how the participants' narratives converged and diverged. This process allowed for participants to remain individualized as well as a larger part of the group. Once the themes were grouped within superordinate themes and sub-themes, the researcher then added in descriptions and contextualizations for each superordinate and sub-theme. This also included examples from participants' narratives. This final codebook was what was used to inform the way the results were presented within Chapter IV.

Role of the Researchers: Positionality and Researcher Bias

Due to the subjectivist epistemological assumptions underlining this study, it was impossible to separate the researcher from the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miller et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, it is important to discuss positionality as a researcher. For this section, first person will be used. Researcher positionality includes how I related to the topic being studied, such as my personal experiences with the research topic, my opinions, thoughts, values, preconceptions, and biases (Bourke, 2014). Based on my positionality, I likely influenced the entire research process, such as my selection of this topic, participants, research questions, data collection and analysis, and the final write-up of this study. Although I cannot fully know the extent to which I

influenced the research process, I engaged in a bridling journal (Vagle, 2009) to critically examine my own role throughout this study. Lastly, the social locations, such as their identities within the context of power, privilege and oppression, of the second coder will be discussed below.

Through a bridling journal, which aligns with IPA methods, I engaged in an iterative and reflexive process throughout the research process. I critically examined my own assumptions, biases, values, identities, and reactions. I also examined my positionality, power, privilege, and oppression as they related to my research process. This is in contrast to bracketing (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which would assume that I could detach from my assumptions, biases, values, identities, positionality, and reactions. Additionally, I was able to use my bridling journal as an active resource when writing my interpretations and alternative conclusions to my findings, as is traditionally recommended in IPA research. Lastly, my bridling journal was shared with my second coder as a way for her to understand my process and help to keep me accountable throughout the data analysis process.

Researchers' Social Locations

I identify as nonbinary, queer, white, middle-class, mostly-able-bodied, atheist, educated, and as an adult. All of my privileged and oppressed identities had implications for the research process and were likely to intersect with the privileged and historically oppressed identities of my participants. While my historically oppressed identities may have been helpful in reducing systems of power and hierarchy present in the research process, I also hold numerous privileged identities that may have counteracted any attempts I made at mitigating power and privilege.

As a nonbinary person, I am a member of the transgender and gender expansive community. As an 'in-group' member to my participants, I believed that I had the potential to create a safe space for participants to share their experiences. I believed that they were more forthcoming than if they were meeting with someone who was cisgender. Some people who identify as transgender within the binary do not see gender expansive people as belonging in the community, so they may still have seen me as an outsider. I was never out as nonbinary during my youth, so, although I shared identities with the participants, I have never experienced the intersections of oppression being a youth and transgender/gender expansive.

Another piece of my identity that was likely to impact this process is my identity as a white person. As a white person, I have incredible amounts of privilege in society. This is one of the most visible aspects of my identities. I have undoubtedly benefited heavily from the systems of power and oppression within the United States that provide more resources and advantages to people with my racial identity. Since these systems are so entrenched in our culture, it is difficult to discern which of my experiences are due to my racial identity. I imagine in all aspects of my life, to my upbringing, class, education, and employment have been heavily influenced by my whiteness.

When meeting with Black, Indigenous, and Persons Of Color (BIPOC) TGEY, it is likely that my whiteness impacted the research process. I was unable to divorce the position of power that being a white person has in society from this research process. My whiteness is the same whiteness as many of those in society who have perpetrated harm against BIPOC communities – and my potential participants. Additionally, I will never be able to understand the intersections of having a historically oppressed racial and ethnic

identity, gender identity and youth status. I hope by having had open dialogue that I invited BIPOC TGEY to feel safe in exploring their race and ethnicity with me, even though I am white.

A third piece of my identity that I think impacted this research process was my age. Although I am part of the transgender and gender expansive community, I am also an adult. As an adult in society, I am assumed to be a responsible, autonomous person that can make decisions for myself. I have much more freedom, power and autonomy than my participants. As such, my age puts me in a position of power over the youth in my study, who have likely experienced many forms of adultism. I hoped by creating a safe space with my participants that they were willing to share their experiences of adultism with me.

A fourth piece of my identity that I think impacted this research process was my education, and as such, my identity as a ‘researcher’. Society tends to view people who are highly educated as having positions of power. My position of power in this way could have unduly influenced my participants to want to impress me, avoid sharing things with me, or feel pressured to share with me. I was mindful of my education and researcher status and worked to reduce the presence of any hierarchies in my research process.

It is also likely that my non-religious, mostly able-bodied, and middle class identities also interacted with this research process. I was mindful of how these additional privileged and oppressed identities I hold interacted with my participants. For instance, I read as able-bodied since my disabilities are not visible. Since the additional identities were less ‘visible’ to others, they may not have had as much of an influence on participants as my other identities.

Lastly, my identities as a counselor and a counselor educator impacted my positionality in this study and selection of this topic. As a counselor who works primarily with TGEY, I am personally invested in sharing the stories of TGEY across professional settings. Additionally, as a counselor educator, I am personally invested in helping counselor educators, counselors, and counselors-in-training learn more about providing transaffirmative care to TGEY. I am also hopeful that this study can help improve the way counselor educators train counselors to provide transaffirmative care to TGEY.

For the data analysis process, there was a second coder. It is important to discuss the identities of the second coder. The second coder was a doctoral student in Counselor Education and Supervision and had qualitative researcher experience. This coder was a member of the larger Sexual, Affectional, Intersex, and Gender Expansive (SAIGE) community, although not a member of the gender expansive community. She identified as a queer, cisgender, white, able-bodied woman from the Midwest. She also worked as a counselor with various SAIGE populations, including individuals who are transgender and gender expansive. Her identities were also likely to impact the research process; as a member of the SAIGE community, she served as both an in-group and out-group member during the research process, and potentially had different biases and reactions than the primary researcher.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Lincoln (1989) outlined four general trustworthiness components for qualitative research: credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability, which have been further elaborated on and explored in subsequent literature (Hays et al., 2016; Morrow, 2005). Credibility refers to the accuracy

of the study, transferability refers to the degree to which the results are transferable to various populations and settings, dependability refers to the consistency of study results and replicability of the study, and confirmability refers to the degree to which other researchers could confirm results (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Hays et al., 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morrow, 2005).

Credibility

The researcher used numerous methods to obtain credibility, such as negative case analysis, reflexivity, thick description, a second coder, and member checking. During the data analysis phase, both coders actively searched for cases that contradicted other participants. This negative case analysis process ensured that a variety of participant experiences were included. It also reduced potential bias by including all aspects of a participant's experiences instead of only those pieces which could be aggregated into themes. Additionally, both coders coded separately and then met periodically throughout the data analysis to compare codes and reach consensus. This process helped reduce any biases of the primary researcher.

The researcher also kept a bridling journal throughout the entire project. The bridling journal was used from the data collection phase of the research through the analysis and reporting the results phases. The researcher used the bridling journal to document and reflect upon any of their values, identities, biases, and reactions throughout the process. During the last phase of data analysis, the bridling journal was also used to help provide the various contextualizations, interpretations and alternative conclusions that are a part of this process in traditional IPA data analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Lastly,

the second coder had access to the bridling journal to further help the researcher understand how they were interacting with the research process.

The researcher engaged in member checking after data analysis by scheduling a third meeting with the participants over Zoom, where they conferred with the participants about the accuracy of the findings. Participants and the researcher mutually discussed and agreed upon the emerging themes and quotes. This occurred for all participants before the researcher and second coder moved to compare themes across cases. Lastly, during the reporting of the findings, the researcher provided a rich and thick description of the participants' experiences, which included ensuring that each participant's voice was equally represented (Smith et al., 2009).

Transferability

The researcher increased the transferability of the results by using thick description in reporting the findings. They did this by including detailed accounts of the study and participants. They also included numerous quotes that highlighted the participants' experiences. Although the primary goal of this study was not transferability due to the idiographic nature of IPA, readers can determine through the thick descriptions of the findings if the results are transferable.

Dependability

Dependability was met through the bridling journal. While different from an audit trail, the bridling journal detailed the researcher's entire process, providing written documentation of the research process and the researcher's interactions with the research. As such, the bridling journal was essentially a 'trail' of the research process, increasing the dependability. This 'trail' also helped any potential readers further understand the

results, the researcher's reactions, and the researcher's decision, such as the presentation of the findings.

Confirmability

Lastly, the confirmability of the findings was met through the prolonged engagement with participants (two 60-to-90-minute interviews), negative case analysis, reflexivity, thick description, the use of a second coder, and member checking. These processes have been described above and all contributed to the confirmability of the findings.

Trustworthiness within Interpretative

Phenomenological Analysis

In addition to general trustworthiness within qualitative research, there are also specific trustworthiness considerations for IPA. Smith's (2011) guidelines for quality in IPA center around the following four principles: (1) the research clearly follows the theoretical principles underlying IPA of phenomenology, idiography, and hermeneutics, (2) it is sufficiently transparent for the reader to understand what was done in the study, (3) it has a 'coherent, plausible, and interesting' analysis of the data, and (4) it has done sufficient sampling of the participants' experiences to provide a density 'of evidence for each theme'.

In addition, strong IPA research has a clear focus, strong data, is rigorous, has sufficient space given to the presentation of each theme, includes an interpretative (not solely descriptive) analysis following the presentation of each theme, the analysis includes divergence and convergence of the data, and is carefully written. Throughout this methodology section, these areas have been addressed, therefore suggesting that this study met the IPA quality criteria as outlined by Smith (2011).

Ethical Considerations

Due to the protected nature of TGEY, special ethical considerations have been made throughout this study based on the *Standards of Care for Research with Participants who Identify as LGBTQ+* (Griffith et al., 2017). *The Standards of Care for Research with Participants who Identify as LGBTQ+* provide specific guidance on the following areas: (a) terminology, (b) reviewing existing literature, (c) identification of research questions, (d) research design, (e) identifying target populations, (f) sampling, (g) recruitment, (h) measurement and instrumentation, (i) data collection, (j) data analysis and interpretation, (k) confidentiality and anonymity, (l) potential limitations, (m) dissemination of knowledge, (n) poststudy support/resources for participants, (o) poststudy support/resources for researchers, (p) ongoing cultural competence, and (q) advocacy and influencing public policy. Great care was taken to follow these ethical guidelines throughout this research study. The following sections detail areas of ethical considerations that applied to this study that have not been covered in previous sections.

Terminology

Throughout this research process, the researcher was mindful of the impact of language and terminology on the participants (Griffith et al., 2017). The researcher was aware of how language has contributed to the oppression of various people within TGEY populations. They were mindful of the most current and inclusive language throughout the writing of this study. When reporting findings, the researcher had participants self-define their identities and used their exact language, including language they used to articulate their intersecting identities (Griffith et al., 2017). As an example, the

demographics questionnaire only included blanks for participants to fill in their identities in their own words.

Reviewing Existing Literature

While this study included some literature that used outdated and sometimes harmful language (such as ‘transsexual’ and ‘transgendered’), this language was not included within the literature review for this study. Instead, current affirmative terms, such as transgender, were used in place of harmful terms. This was in adherence to the best ethical practices so as not to continue to perpetuate oppressive language within this study (Griffith et al., 2017).

Recruitment

During the recruitment process, great care was taken to protect participants to not out potential participants or intrude upon their safe spaces (Griffith et al., 2017). Before distributing flyers at schools, mental health centers, doctor’s offices, and support groups, the researcher contacted the leaders of these safe spaces to gain prior permission. The flyer included a caveat stating ‘please be mindful of where you keep this flyer so as not to unintentionally out someone’. The flyer also had a link to the website Surveillance Self Defense, which has information for SAIGE youth to safely access resources while protecting their identities. This added step helped protect any TGEY youth who were not out from being outed. During any phone or texting conversation with participants and/or potential participants, the researcher was also mindful as to not intentionally out anyone such as discussing any parts of the study. They also refrained from talking about gender identity or additional SAIGE identities with participants unless in-person during the interview process (such as on the phone or texting). The researcher also talked with

participants to work to minimize any risks. Additionally, since there is an over-representation of white, educated, middle-class participants who are out in TGEY research (Griffith et al., 2017), purposeful sampling methods was used to attempt recruit diverse participants and participants who were not out to their caregiver(s).

Consent

In loco parentis was used during the assent process instead of the traditional consent process to protect the participants from being outed to their caregivers (Griffith et al., 2017). The participating TGEY identified a trusted adult outside of the study to ensure protection from the researcher and the effects of participating in the study. This trusted adult was present during the assent process. The researcher explained this process to the TGEY before participating and stated to the TGEY that the researcher cannot help the TGEY pick this person to ensure their safety. The IRB application, including the assent forms, are found in Appendix D.

Once a potential participant contacted the researcher to participate, they discussed with the participants their status as out to their caregivers. The potential participants were informed that they did not need to have their caregiver present for the assent process, nor did their caregiver need to know if the youth was going to participate. The researcher discussed with the TGEY that they needed any trusted adult present only during the assent process. This trusted adult could have included, but was not limited to: a caregiver, friend, relative, mentor, counselor, etc. This helped to ensure their protection as best as possible.

The researcher briefly discussed with the potential participant the nature of the study and ways their confidentiality was protected. If they wanted to proceed, the

researcher then set up the first meeting with the participant at a mutually agreed upon time. At this meeting the researcher went over the assent with the TGEY and the trusted adult. During this time, they discussed with the TGEY how they could safely sign the assent electronically and where they would store/delete their own copy. The youth and the researcher discussed the potential for being outed if the TGEY did not delete their copy. Participants were told that they could decline to answer any question and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. After the assent process was completed, the trusted adult left.

Confidentiality

Special consideration was given to protect the confidentiality of the participants (Griffith et al., 2017). In their assent documents, participants were informed that there was always a risk of being outed in a study such as this, even with all of the precautions that were taken. The only document linking the participant to this study was the assent document, which was protected under the University's IRB. Since this was a protected document, the identity of the TGEY was protected; even if a caregiver contacted the researcher about the study, the researcher was unable to confirm or deny that the caregiver's specific youth participated in the study.

After the transcription had been confirmed for accuracy, the audio recordings were deleted to protect their anonymity. The interviews were saved on the researcher's password-protected computer, using pseudonyms to further protect their confidentiality. The primary researcher (and not the second coder) was the only person to have access to the participants' real names on the assent document. The researcher also chose to do individual interviews over other data collection methods like focus-groups to create a safe

space between the participant and the researcher, and avoid the potential for any unintentional outing of participants.

Dissemination of Knowledge

The results of this study are presented in the participants' own words. The researcher took every measure possible to not pathologize the participants or perpetuate any harmful assumptions in the presentation of the research findings. IPA was also chosen to reduce the tendency for researchers and the public to assume that all people within one identity have the same experience; as such, the results will attend to the multiplicity of experiences of TGEY in keeping with the best practices (Griffith et al., 2017).

Post-Study Support for Participants

Engaging in research with vulnerable populations has the potential to bring up hurtful and challenging experiences. The researcher worked with the youth to provide a list of resources (such as counseling, support groups, and online resources) for their follow-up care. All youth were given resources; two sets of resources were created- one for TGEY who were out to their caregiver(s), and one for TGEY who were not out to their caregiver(s). This way, if the youth was not out to their caregiver, they could still be emailed a resource list. These resources are in Appendix D, with the IRB application materials. Additionally, the researcher was available to discuss any reactions to the research process, as debriefing is a critical part of research with this population (Griffith et al., 2017).

Ongoing Cultural Competence

It is recommended in the standards of care that researchers continue to strive towards cultural competence with this population. As such, the researcher is continuing to learn about TGEY to continue to grow their cultural competence. The researcher strived to provide an inclusive, affirmative environment that did not further oppress, marginalize, or pathologize the participants during the research process. Additionally, it is recommended in the standards of care that researchers focus on resiliency, gratitude, and positives in their research with this population, since much research in the past has been based on a pathological or deficits-based lens (Griffith et al., 2017). The researcher took great care during the data collection and analysis processes to use a resiliency- focused lens, holistically understand the participants and their experiences, and provide as inclusive an environment as possible.

Advocacy and Influencing Public Policy

Doing research with TGEY is considered an act of social justice (Griffith et al., 2017). The researcher understood the great weight and responsibility that comes with sharing the stories of TGEY across professional settings, and did not do so without great consideration, care, and attention to ethics. As recommended within the Standards of Care, the researcher was hopeful that the results of this study might influence social change and improve the quality of life of TGEY seeking counseling services (Griffith et al., 2017).

Conclusion

By using IPA, the researcher hoped to share how TGEY were experiencing their gender identity, how their gender identity intersected with their additional identities and

life experiences, and the meanings they gathered from these experiences, while contextualizing these narratives within the current cultural, social, political, and historical contexts. This methodology was based on a subjectivist, interpretivist and social constructionist epistemology. The ontology of this study was relativism and historical realism. The theoretical underpinnings were founded within constructivism and critical theory. Throughout the research process, the researcher engaged in reflexivity and bridling, so that personal reactions and decisions could be documented. In the end, readers of this study will thoroughly understand the research process as well as the complex and nuanced lives of the TGEY who participated.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This chapter first discusses the make-up of the participants, including their demographics. Then, this chapter presents the superordinate themes that emerged from their narratives. True to the idiographic nature of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the guiding methodology for this study, the convergent and divergent themes amongst the participants' individual narratives were highlighted. This was done by presenting the converging themes of the participants' narratives as the superordinate themes, while highlighting the convergent and divergent narratives within each.

Results are also presented based on guidelines for presentation of findings within IPA studies from Smith (2011). Smith (2011) provides certain guidelines for the presentation of findings based on the number of each participant for each theme. Guidelines for an "acceptable" presentation of findings are as follows: when 4-8 participants discussed a sub-theme within the superordinate themes, extracts were included from at least three participants; and when all nine participants discussed a subtheme, extracts were included from at least five participants. In order to achieve a "good" presentation of findings, Smith (2011) also recommends: a well-focused presentation of findings providing an in-depth analysis of a specific topic; strong data and interpretations; and engaging. To provide a rich and thick description of themes, as many participant extracts were included as possible to highlight the intricacies of the superordinate themes and subthemes. Extracts were selected to highlight a diverse range

of participant experiences, while aiming to give equal representation to all of the participants' experiences within each superordinate theme, as well as across the entirety of the findings (Smith, 2011).

Lastly, these results are briefly contextualized within the historical, political, social, and cultural factors present at the time of data collection and analysis. A more in-depth analysis is presented within Chapter V. The purpose of this research was to understand how Transgender and Gender Expansive Youth (TGEY) experienced their gender identities, additional intersecting identities, and the meanings they made from their experiences. Another purpose of this study was to understand their experiences in their own words.

Participants

Nine participants participated in this study to completion, with one participant dropping out of the study after the first semi-structured interview. The nine participants who completed the study participated in two 60-90 minute semi-structured interviews and one member-checking meeting at the end. The participants will be referred to by their pseudonyms to protect their anonymity: John Joe, Lynn, Mx. Peacock, Mason, Debbie Reynolds, Zinniah, Valdin, Henry, and Pringles. Participants responded to the following open-response demographics questions to the extent that they felt comfortable: (a) age, (b) gender identity, (c) pronouns, (d) racial and ethnic identities, (e) sexual, affectional, and romantic identities, (f) religion and spirituality, (g) socioeconomic status, (h) disabilities and abilities, and (i) additional identities. Participants wrote answers in their own words, which are reported here exactly as they were written. Participant demographics are found in Table 1 on pages 73-74.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	John Joe	Lynn	Mx. Peacock	Mason	Debbie Reynolds	Zinniah	Valdin	Henry	Pringles
Age	16	17	15	13	17	15	16	17	16
Gender Identity	Male	Male	Genderfluid	Agender	Female	Female	Genderfluid	Genderfluid	Trans Female
Pronouns	He/Him/His	He/Him	They/Them	They/Them	She/Her	She/Her/It	He/They	They/Them	She/Her
Racial & Ethnic Identity	Caucasian and Native American	Caucasian	White	Caucasian	White	White, European	Caucasian and Chicano	Caucasian/Finnish	Bi-Racial Mexican, Caucasian
Sexual, Affectional & Romantic Identities	-	Pan	Bisexual/Poly(romantic)	Queer	Bisexual	Abrosexual, Lesbian, Pansexual, Polysexual, and Homoflexible	Panromantic and Demisexual	Ace/Aro	Asexual and Lesbian
Religion & Spirituality	-	-	Unknown	Pagan	Agnostic	Non-religious, Agnostic, Atheist, Pagan	Wiccan	Wiccan	Christian

Table 1, Continued

Pseudonym	John Joe	Lynn	Mx. Peacock	Mason	Debbie Reynolds	Zinniah	Valdin	Henry	Pringles
Socioeconomic Status	-	-	Middle Class (I think)	Upper Middle Class	Lower Middle Class	Average	Lower Middle Class and Middle Class	Middle Class	Middle Class
Disabilities & Abilities	-	-	Physically Able, Mental Illness	-	Chronic Depression, ADHD	Asperger's Syndrome, Linguistically Talented, Insomnia, OCD, ADHD, Mild Synesthesia	Creativity and Strong Conversation Skills	-	Poland Syndrome, ADHD, Major Depressive Disorder, PTSD
Additional Identities	-	-	-	-	Musician, Politician	Language-Learner, Visual-Learner	Musician, Artist	-	-

Presentation of Findings

This next section details the main findings from this study, as organized into superordinate themes. Six superordinate themes highlighted the participants' narratives and experiences: (1) Gender Identity Journey and Coming Out; (2) Identities and Experiences of Oppression; (3) Navigating Mental Health and Physical Health; (4) Interpersonal Relationships; (5) Navigating Contextual Factors; (6) Making Sense of Experiences and Resiliency. Each superordinate theme has sub-themes with additional topics where pertinent to organize the data. A summary of the findings is presented, following the in-depth analysis of themes. This summary of findings is in Table 2 which starts on page 75. Within this table, the superordinate themes are on the left side column. On the right side, the sub-themes are bolded with any additional topics within those subthemes in un-bolded text.

Theme One: Gender Identity Journey and Coming Out

This first superordinate theme captures the participants' narratives around their gender identity development and their coming out process. This includes how they explored their gender identities, made the realizations that they were transgender and/or gender expansive, and how they described their gender. The participants shared stories about how they explored their gender and expressed their gender through haircuts, trying out different clothes, trying different pronouns, and through storytelling. Almost all participants described learning that being transgender and/or gender expansive "was a thing."

Table 2
Summary of Findings

Superordinate Themes	Sub-Themes and Sub-Topics
Gender Identity Journey and Coming Out	Gender Identity Journey Realizing Trans “Was a Thing” Discovering Gender Gender Expression and Descriptions Relationship to the Label Transgender Navigating my Gender within Cultural Contexts Learning and Unlearning Gender Roles Personal Experiences with Gender Role Enforcement Reconstructing Gender Coming Out Fears and Anxieties Deciding to Come Out Navigating Selectively Coming Out Reactions to Coming Out
Navigating Identities and Experiences of Oppression	Gender Transphobia Invalidations Safety Positive Experiences, Validations, and Representation Race and Ethnicity Being White-Passing Navigating Contextual Factors Connecting to Racial and Ethnic Identities Religion and Spirituality Growing Up Navigating Christianity While Being LGBTQ Current Beliefs and Experiences Generation Z, Youth Oppression Sexuality Exploration Description Coming Out Navigating Oppression and Heteronormativity Navigating Identities Within the LGBTQ Community
Navigating Mental Health and Physical Health	Mental Health Trauma and Coping Neurodiversity Mental Health Treatment Physical Health
Interpersonal Relationships	Family Conflicts and/or Divorce Friends, Peers, and Dating “All My Friends are Gay” Navigating Gender with Friends

Table 2, *continued*

Superordinate Themes	Sub-Themes and Sub-Topics
Navigating Contextual Factors	School Navigating Identities in School COVID-19 Pandemic Generation Z Politics: “It’s All Spiraling out of Control” Cisheteronormativity
Making Sense of Experiences and Resiliency	Creativity Fighting Against Dehumanization Activism and Education

They then described how they connected learning that being transgender “existed” to the moments they realized that those labels described their own experiences. This main theme also captures how the participants’ made sense of, and described their gender identities now, including how they made sense of the label ‘trans’. In addition, this theme presents how the participants made sense of their gender identities within the context of cisheteronormativity. This included how the participants had personally learned and unlearned gender roles, experiences they had conforming/nonconforming to traditional gender roles, and how they made sense of their genders in the context of traditional gender roles. Lastly, this superordinate theme explores how the participants navigated coming out as transgender (or not) and the reactions they received (or anticipated receiving). This sub-theme of coming out highlights the complexities and nuances of being out in some spaces and not others, how and why some participants had chosen to only be out in specific places, and any anxieties and fears they had about coming out.

My Gender Journey

Realizing Trans Was “a Thing”. For many participants, their gender identity journeys started with the realization that being transgender and/or gender expansive “was a thing”. All of the participants had a moment where they learned that being transgender

“was a thing” from someone in their lives, either family, friends and/or through social media. Lynn stated that he “didn’t really know [being trans] existed” until he was 12 or 13, when he learned about it from one of his aunts. Similarly to Lynn, Valdin also learned about being transgender from family members. His/their brother identified as transgender, who “tested the waters first.” Valdin shared that before his/their older brother came out, his/their mom had been “against” people being transgender. This acceptance from his/their mom helped Valdin feel permission to explore his/their own gender identity.

Other participants learned about being transgender from their friends. For John Joe, he learned about being transgender from one of his close friends who had come out as transgender. Henry also had moments of learning that being transgender “was really a thing” from a friend. They said:

In eighth grade, my one of my best friends came out as trans. Like he came out as a trans guy. And I think I was one of, if not the first person he came out to when he first came out...I knew for a while, that that was a thing. Like, before he came out, I knew it was a thing. And then like when he came out, I was like, 'Oh, this is really a thing'...because when he came out, that kind of sparked me going into like, well, am I a guy or girl or what?...At some point before my freshman year, I figured out like ‘oh, nonbinary is a thing’ and went with that.

Elaborating further, Henry shared how they found out about nonbinary identities: “I think, it was probably like, my, my trans friend posting stuff on social media. And I was like, ‘Oh! Oh, there are other [genders]’.” While Lynn learned about being transgender from his aunt, he also learned about being nonbinary from a friend. Additionally, both

Lynn and Mx. Peacock explored various gender identities and what it meant to be transgender and/or gender expansive through “Googling” definitions on the internet.

Discovering Gender. After learning that being transgender and/or gender expansive “existed,” many participants shared how they then discovered that they were in fact transgender. Lynn talked about how it was a normal process for “trans and cis teens [to] explore who they are.” “That’s why being a teenager exists. You’re learning who you are, and you’re learning who you like to hang out with. And you’re growing as a person,” he shared. Mx. Peacock, Valdin, Zinniah, and Mason also had moments where they “realized” they were transgender and/or gender expansive.

Part of this process involved participants exploring the gender identity that best fit for them. Mx. Peacock shared that they were “like looking at like, the genderqueer side of things, because I knew I wasn’t a dude. I just didn’t know what I was. So you know, all this [sic] dictionary definitions.” Mason said it took them a “long time to realize” that the reason they never felt connected to masculinity was because they were agender. “I just don’t, like I never felt like totally comfortable with masculinity or femininity. Like, so I kind of don’t identify as anything,” they shared. Elaborating, Mason said: “for a long time I just identified as non-binary, because I didn’t like have a specific thing. And then I basically just kind of Googled what I felt like to find a label for it.” Before they realized they were nonbinary (and later genderfluid), Henry explored being nonbinary through playing Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) as a nonbinary character: “I didn’t even properly identify as nonbinary. I was like, in denial town. And I was like, I just think it’s an interesting character choice.” Henry also shared how they explored which labels captured their gender identity the best after they realized that they were gender expansive:

Nonbinary is what I went for, for like the first two years I was out and then I was like, this isn't quite right and switched over to genderfluid. I still use nonbinary because I think the definition for me is kind of just in-between somewhere on the gender spectrum.

Similarly, Valdin explained how they explored their gender and which labels captured their experience:

I started questioning my gender about in sixth-fifth- grade. And then I was like I think I might be more male than female. And then, as I started to grow up, I was like, I'm not either, and I'm both at the same time (laughs). I played around with several labels, but like, ended up finding gender fluid to be the best one.

Lastly, for Pringles, exploring her transgender identity meant letting go of internalized transphobia. She professed that “even back when I was three...wish I was a girl,” although it took her a long time to fully integrate her experiences. She stated that figuring out her gender identity: “was a little confusing, because I would still somewhere in the back of my head there was that nagging, belief like this is weird, enough. (pause). Then, like later it was like, ‘Oh, me is me’.” In sum, participants’ gender identity discovery process involved learning about transgender and/or gender expansive identities, then conceptualizing their own genders, and then finding words, labels and definitions to encapsulate their gender identities.

As part of this gender identity exploration process, many of the participants also talked about changing their hair, clothes, pronouns and names as ways to explore and express their gender. Zinniah stated that she/it “discovered that I want to be a girl at like age seven.” After she/it realized, she/it started wearing dresses in first grade and “was a

full on [girl], like I changed everything.” Lynn shared that he experimented with different pronouns and names to try out what worked for him. Lastly, John Joe, Lynn, and Mx. Peacock all shared that changing their hair to reflect their gender identity was a really important part of their gender exploration and expression.

Gender Expression and Descriptions

Participants then talked about the words and labels they used to describe their gender identities, how they defined their genders, and how they expressed their genders at the time of data collection. A couple of participants also shared about how they viewed the word transgender itself. When asked to describe their gender identities, Lynn and Debbie Reynolds responded simply. “FtM” and “presents masculinely,” Lynn shared. “I am a proud and open transgender woman,” declared Debbie Reynolds. For others, understanding and describing their gender identities proved more complicated. As an example, Mx. Peacock shared that their gender “is complicated and ...hard to determine a lot of the time.” “I know I'm not a girl, does that count?,” they asked. Elaborating further, Mx. Peacock explained:

Generally, if I can't quite tell that generally means I'm both [a boy/girl]. But then again like sometimes if I don't really care, that probably means neither [boy nor girl]. And then, for the one where I literally just like think to myself, ‘like do I want a skirt or a dress or a shirt?’, I'll visualize that in which one I'm drawn to if I can't tell.

Mason expressed similar sentiments around difficulties putting their gender identity into words. They stated they were “non-binary or agender if we want to be specific.” “I'm just, you know, I'm a paradox,” they shared, as someone who identified outside of

the binary. Further describing their experience Mason said: “[I] just don't like really identify with any gender...I identify as agender, which is like a lack of gender.” They also stated that their gender is “mine” and “just there.” For Mason and Mx. Peacock, while they had a deeply felt sense of their gender identities, it proved difficult to describe those identities in words.

In describing her/its gender identity, Zinniah stated that she/it was: “more accurately just a transgender female.” Offering her/its thoughts on why female is the best label for her/it, she/it stated: “I probably wouldn't have the courage enough to go full on non-binary, because I would identify mostly as a girl, but I have been wanting to go a little butchy.” She/it also elaborated on how her/its pronouns best fit her/it. She/it shared that since she/it identifies as a female, that is why she/it goes with she/her pronouns. Elaborating more on why Zinniah used the pronoun it as well, she/it explained the following: “I just kind of like the pronoun ‘it’”; “it's just me being weird”; “it's just kind of fun”; and “my ‘it’ pronouns doesn't really come from my gender.” She/it also had this to share about why she/it used the pronoun it:

some people in the LGBT community actually identify as other kin. Yeah, I'm not that, I just don't like humans. And I sometimes like to think that I might be an animal. But, um, yeah, it's hard to explain. I just kind of like the pronoun 'it' because I don't like being a human.

Zinniah's use of the pronoun it, while loosely connected to her/its gender identity, was also a way for her/it to separate from humans who were often unkind and/or destroying the environment.

The way that Henry described their gender identity, depended on who they were talking to; changing labels based on the likelihood that another person would know what those labels meant. “I have like, three different labels I use interchangeably for my gender identities,” they stated, sharing that they use “nonbinary, genderqueer, and genderfluid depending who I’m talking to.” Further explaining how they used these labels, they stated: “genderqueer is for the people who probably don't know what genderfluid is, and I don't really want to have to explain it to you. So I can just use this word that means not straight.” For Henry, they were intentional about which labels they used and with whom, illustrating the complex ways in which they navigated their gender in a cisnormative society. When asked how they would describe their gender, they explained:

if I just pick like an identity for right now it would be demigirl. That's not going to be all the time...if gender is like a line and there's a guy on one end or girl on the other. And I know that's not really how it works. But for the purpose of this explanation. I'm just kind of, I'm the little slider thing, and I'm going ‘woooo’ between it...I’m not like, generally, I'm not like super hard on either end, sometimes it happens, but it's not a usual thing. Usually, I'm somewhere in the middle.

Sometimes, they also shared, they did not feel like they had a gender at all.

Valdin, who also used the label genderfluid, described his/their gender as:

my gender switches little bit around. It's mostly stays in the male and non-binary and slightly feminine area. But like, I'm usually either both, neither,

or male. Like there's really no in-between for that. So I'm like, cool. I mean, there's an in between as both.

Additionally, he/they shared this about their gender identity:

I'm wearing a skirt right now. And I feel more masculine today like male spectrum today. So I'm like, Oh, I'm going to use he/him pronouns. But I'm going to wear a skirt...I love my femininity. Like that's a big part of me.

Further elucidating, Valdin said his/their gender is “just a flow of the different genders flowing through you.” He/They also stated: “sometimes it's like, oh, you're in the middle, you're like, both male and female, or you're more to the masculine side like that, or you're more to the feminine side, or you're just not on that scale at all.” Lastly, as he/they expressed frustration that some people did not think his/heir identity was valid, he/they confidently shared that “it’s not like I want to be that, it’s because I am that.”

Pringles explained that “even though I don't present myself as especially feminine or really even planning to, I've just always felt like it was right.” For her gender expression “it just comes down to, how I'm referred to, a name that, at least to me, is decidedly feminine.” She shared that another large piece to expressing her gender identity was: “knowing myself.” “But it mostly just comes down to you know, (pause) pronouns and name,” she shared, as the most important parts of her gender identity and expression.

Participants also discussed the things they were proud of and liked about themselves in relation to their gender identity. When asked what she/it was proud of, Zinniah declared: “proud that I get to have two different private parts in one lifetime.” Pringles shared that in addition to being proud of her gender she had “a pretty sick

ponytail.” As she thought about it, she stated that her ponytail and “my eyes are the only part of my body that I enjoy.” Additionally, she stated: “I have some pretty nice calves, I might say. Um, but like, it pretty much only extends to my name, my pronouns and, like, awesome ponytail.” For Debbie Reynolds, she was proud of being a transgender woman. When sharing about what brought them pride about who they were, Valdin expressed: “I’ve been like having fun with my makeup a lot. It’s been really nice.” He/they also stated: “wearing my skirts, and my shirts...it’s just fun to be silly and authentic to myself” was what brought them pride.

Relationship to the Label Transgender. Lastly, numerous participants explored their relationship to the word transgender itself. Henry, and Valdin shared about what the label trans meant to them, as well as how they defined it. According to Henry:

transgender is (pause) anything where you don't identify with your like birth gender, like birth, like anything, you don't identify with your sex or whatever.

Um, and so that includes like, nonbinary, genderfluid, and all of that stuff.

Therefore, Henry used the word transgender for themselves. Valdin shared: “that label fits for me because I identify trans as not being the gender you were born as.” For other participants, an important distinction was made between being transgender and their gender identity. These participants, such as John Joe, Zinniah and Pringles, shared that being transgender was part of their sex and transition process, but that their gender was just their gender identity. For instance, Zinniah shared: “I am transgender, but I identify myself as female,” when asked to describe her/its gender identity. Similarly, John Joe stated that although he was technically transgender, he “identify[ies] as internally male.” When describing her gender, Pringles remarked: “my gender identity is just female

straight up...trans is just an extra part.” For John Joe, he described how his gender was male, but he felt like society wanted him to use the label transgender. Pringles also provided her thoughts. She stated: “a lot of people see trans is actually part of their gender identity. When I, I mean, this is completely personal, but I view it more as like just a process to get to your real identity.” Additionally, she explained: “I, honestly, I just think it should be a...more widespread view. Because, I mean, it is entirely separate. Because you could make the case that I was assigned female at birth, and just with some extra spiciness to it.” For these participants, being transgender was more of a process than their actual gender identities. Overall, participants had unique and personal relationships to how they described their gender identities, the labels they chose, and their relationship to the word transgender itself.

Navigating my Gender within Cultural Contexts

Within this sub-theme, participants talked about how they made sense of their gender identities within the cultural contexts at that time. This mainly included how participants made sense of gender roles and expectations, in the context of a cisheteronormative society. They also shared stories of ways gender roles and expectations influenced their lives and development. Exploring how they understood their gender in societal context was an important part of their gender identity development, exploration, and process.

Learning and Unlearning Gender Roles. Mx. Peacock learned “being non-binary is a good thing where there’s not really any expectations, um, on what you can and can’t do.” Elaborating, they explained how they saw gender outside of traditional gender roles: “I see gender in less like ‘the boys wear blue sense and more of how you feel and

what you wear.” For John Joe, he found joy in being able to re-define gender roles by stating: “breaking down toxic masculinity is really cool.” He had also heard stereotypes that transgender people typical struggle and are not happy. As a happy trans person, he shared that he felt like it was: “a big fuck you to societal expectations that I am tans and happy.” In breaking away from traditional masculine gender roles, Lynn felt like he was: “not enough of a jerk to be a guy.” Instead, he shared that he was “quiet, and I care really a lot about like other people and making sure I’m nice.” He celebrated his masculinity by going to orchestras with his dad.

Henry shared that they had learned certain gender roles when they were younger and they “definitely had to unlearn a lot of things when I got older”. “I remember when I was a kid like my dad had a purple water bottle or something. And I’m like, but that’s a girl color,” they shared. To unlearn traditional gender roles, they saw representations of gender roles online, and they “read a lot of books, a lot of them...have very, like, fuck gender messages.” They also learned from their parents who defied some traditional gender roles. Now, they explained, they have conversations with their younger sister about unlearning traditional gender roles. Pringles shared that she learned and unlearned a lot about gender roles in her family, mostly due to her mom’s inspiration. “My mom’s about the least feminine straight woman you’ll ever meet,” she shared. In terms of gender roles, she said her mom “both defies them and sets them.” Lastly, Valdin shared his/their experiences learning and unlearning traditional gender roles. He/They stated: “I was really raised in a much more feminine household.” Currently, he/they were exploring masculine and feminine energy. “Everyone has both,” he/they shared, it was more how the energy was used that was important. “I think the fluidity of both the masculine and

feminine is so much fun,” Valdin said, as they conceptualized his/their visualizations of their respective energies. For feminine energy, he/they stated: “there’s more curves, and there’s more like, place where you can be flowy.” On the other hand, he/they stated that “masculinity like seems much more rigid.” All in all, participants first learned to recognize traditional social constructions of gender and gender roles and then how to deconstruct these narratives.

Personal Experiences with Gender Role Enforcements. Another main piece participants discussed within this subtheme, were personal experiences they had navigating gender roles and expectations in the world. Most of these experiences were negative, and included navigating a stigma against femininity if the participant was born male, being forced to express their gender that aligned with their sex assigned at birth, and facing stigma if they did not fit into traditional ‘male’ gender roles. As an example, Mason shared: “there’s always like the stigma around being feminine in any way if you were born male, and I was always pretty feminine.” Although their parents did not follow traditional gender roles, Mason shared about how they: “remember always wanting to like, it sounds so cliché, but I always wanted to like buy a Barbie doll. But I never asked for it because I thought my parents would think it was weird.” When asked where they thought this message came from, they shared: “it’s so prevalent in media. I’m not shocked that I knew, and I just had that there, because my parents never even enforced like any fucking gender roles on me.” This experience highlighted how entrenched gender role expectations were in society, even if one’s own household was accepting.

Debbie Reynolds’ experiences with gender role enforcements in her own life were much more pronounced and rigid. She shared that her “dad always tried to force me to be

masculine.” As part of this process, she explained that her dad: “would take me to the park and try and get me to throw footballs with him. He would take me to hockey tryouts.” This example highlights how her dad had been trying to get her to express traditionally masculine gender roles and expectations. Debbie Reynold’s also share about specific ways he tried to enforce traditional gender roles on her: “as a kid, I would dress up in girl clothes. And I got caught by my dad twice, and both times I got the shit beat out of me.” In addition to these gender role enforcements by her dad, she also experienced hurtful messages from her mom: “when I would dress up as a girl, my mom would tell me as a kid, ‘you know, you’d make a very ugly girl’.” To cope, Debbie Reynolds “would shut down, and I just became Wall-E.”

Pringles shared her experiences with gender roles when she was still perceived as male. “Being perceived as male, I guess, there’s a big stigma to be very horny all the time,” she stated, highlighting how rigid gender roles harm people of all genders. As someone who was asexual, these messages caused her to feel pressure to fit into the “male stereotype.” “I just picked one random, like thing to pretend I was into and then never talked about it again...I just picked a random, believable, fetish...it was cosplay,” she shared. For her, she felt such pressure to conform to traditional gender roles for people perceived to be male, that she chose something to fit in. Although Mason’s, Debbie Reynolds’, and Pringles’ experiences with gender roles in their own lives differed, they all highlighted the pervasiveness of gender role expectations and rigid enforcement of the gender binary.

Reconstructing Gender. Participants then discussed how they made sense of themselves, their gender, and their additional identities within the context of gender roles.

Participants talked mainly about ways they conformed or did not conform to traditional gender roles. Responses varied widely to how participants navigated traditional gender roles for themselves. For John Joe, he shared how he navigated being transgender: “I identify as internally male, which I feel like is kind of weird, because I feel like there's an expectation to segregate myself from, like as a trans identity with you being female to male or identifying as trans.” For him, he felt like there was an expectation from society to identify as transgender and named that he was female-to-male, even though he only identified as male. He also shared his experiences with navigating traditional gender roles within the context of passing. As such, he stated: “[I] would say I definitely struggle between passing as male, not passing as male, attempting to pass as male, and then just trying to fit in those social constructs to pass. And then the other idea of that harmful of trying to put myself in those boxes. (sighs).” As he wrestled with these concepts of trying to fit into traditional gender roles to pass, he was also able to name how harmful the boxes were in the first place. This same dichotomy of wanting to fit into gender roles to pass while also expressing disdain for them was also highlighted when John Joe shared about his newfound hobby of woodworking:

one of the reasons I was really excited about this hobby... is because woodworking is a male dominated hobby and traditionally masculine hobby...And literally what I told you that I was pissed off about, is the fact that gender roles were dumb. But, sometimes traditionally masculine things that society sees as things that are masculine are affirming.

This last quote from John Joe elucidated the complex relationships many participants faced in expressing their own unique genders, while feeling pressure to, and validation from, conforming to traditional gender roles in some regard.

Some of the other participants also felt disdain for traditional gender roles, and not wanting to be confined by them. Mason shared that they “never really cared about [gender roles] either, because my parents didn’t care.” For them, they saw their gender as “somewhere, not there,” meaning existing somewhere, not within traditional gender roles. Zinniah and Debbie Reynolds both shared how they viewed any traditional ‘male’ qualities they embodied as them being “a badass girl,” or “a strong woman,” respectively. Zinniah shared: “I do what I like, I don’t care that woodworking is ‘manly’, I love it, so what, I’m a badass girl.” Debbie Reynolds stated: “yes, I have a lot of ‘male’ qualities. I, I don’t see that as me being androgynous I just see it as me being a strong woman.” To further drive home the separation in Zinniah’s mind between her/its gender and her/its gender expression, she/it stated: “my gender is separate from what I like, I just do what I like,” and “I don’t really choose my interest anymore in the female area, I just choose my interest with what I like. And I like Woodworking.” Lastly, Mx. Peacock shared that since they were perceived as a girl “I get more expectations from that side,” although as a non-binary person they were more likely to experience “limitations that go with being trans in society.” This last point also connected to the intricacies of experiences in navigating their gender in a cisheternormative society.

Finally, Valdin explored how he/they navigated “masculine and feminine energy” as a part of his/their spirituality. Exploring both energies he/they said: “[I] hold a lot more feminine energy” and “[I] don’t really show my masculinity much.” As a part of his/their

process Valdin had been “letting go of that, and just having normal masculine energy, it’s been really nice to let go and be like, ‘Oh, I can feel all these feelings again,” in reference to letting go of the ‘Divine Masculine’. It seemed Valdin was learning how to deconstruct traditional gender roles and reconstruct them into his/their own definitions. How this showed up for him/them was that he/they “haven’t had my rigid, like self anymore. So, meaning my flowing and flexibility has become very intense” as he/they focused more on their feminine energy. As he/they became more of himself/themself, Valdin: “[I] don’t need to be strong and tough. I can be my little weird self, that’s sometimes quiet and sometimes shy and stuff like that.” All in all, most of the participants were able to share how they made sense of their gender identities and their gender expression within the context of traditional gender roles.

Coming Out

The third major part of the participants’ gender identity journeys was the coming out process. Participants’ coming out stories varied widely. Deciding to come out was a complex process, often fraught with fears and anxieties internalized from dominant societal narratives. Even participants who figured their parents would be supportive, reported anxieties and fears. Some participants shared how they navigated being out in some places and not others, with fears of rejection a common undercurrent.

Fears and Anxieties. Mx. Peacock shared how they cried the first time they came out (as bisexual) due to their general anxiety, even though their parents were supportive. Sharing their coming out story, Mx. Peacock stated: “my parents were pretty sure I was going to turn out to be a lesbian. And I was like, nope, more complicated [I’m genderfluid and Bi].” Mason also had anxieties and fears around coming out, although

their parents were supportive. Mason, who had been “out as non-binary for... maybe half a year,” stated that while they knew their parents would be supportive, it was still a scary experience. “I mean, it was still scary for me to like, come out, which is weird because like, I knew they were going to be supportive, but it was still such like a scary experience. They were just like (thumbs up),” they explained. When asked where they thought this fear originated, they replied: “I think it's mostly just social in a way, because it's just like, you spent so long trying to figure it out for yourself. It's hard to like tell other people. It feels like very personal.” Regardless of the perceived reactions participants’ thought they would receive for coming out, many of them were so afraid of coming out that they experienced anxiety around the experience, and in Debbie Reynold’s experience, suicidal ideation.

For Debbie Reynolds, the fears and anxieties about coming out, ran deep. Debbie Reynolds stated that she was afraid she was “gonna lose everybody,” if she came out. Sharing her story, she said the stress of coming out was so upsetting that:

everything was going so bad that when I was in New York, it was literally when I performed in Carnegie Hall. Um. (pause) I had (pause) planned to jump in front of the subway on our way back from Carnegie Hall to the hotel. That was my plan. I'm going to perform at Carnegie Hall, sweet, and I'll kill myself. And I'll, I would have died after doing something that I was proud of myself for... they put me on hold, and I came out. And was just like this too much. I can't do it.

Unfortunately, Debbie Reynolds’s fears of rejection were so strong that she had seriously contemplated suicide. Luckily, Debbie Reynolds was able to get help and treatment. When she did have the courage to come out, she came out with her sexual orientation

before her gender identity, similar to Mx. Peacock and other participants. “I didn't come out 'til sophomore year of high school as bisexual. And then I told my mom like a month later 'Wait, that's not it I have something else',” Debbie Reynolds stated.

Henry shared that their fears about coming out stemmed from horror stories. “It’s scary,” they shared, when describing their experience coming out to their parents in a family therapy session. “I kept like, backing out of it. Because, like, you know, we've all heard the horror stories about like, you think your parents are going to be accepting. And then they're not,” they further elucidated. Continuing explaining their fears, they shared: “I've heard of people who were like, yeah, my friend is trans. And they were okay with that. But then, like, when they came out, it was a whole other thing. So yeah, it's kind of it's scary.” Due to this fear, Henry told their parents they were gender expansive “a very long time after I told my friends.” This was because “it was easier for at least like friend group because I'd already had a friend who had come out as trans, like I already knew they were pretty accepting. Pretty much all of them are like, queer in some way.” Henry’s stories highlight the importance of representation and safety in coming out.

Inspiration to Come Out. Lynn, who had two transgender siblings expressed this as his coming out inspiration: “every trans person in house came out before me. I'm like (sibling) came out and I'm like, come on, now I gotta.” Further explaining, he stated: “I was planning on waiting to December and then starting a new decade and now everybody else is out, so what the hell.” For Debbie Reynolds, her inspiration was through media representation: “sophomore year, the show *Transparent* gave the courage to come out because it “made me realize, I don't want to come out in my 70s and like, possibly lose a marriage and kids, just be unhappy most of my life.” For Lynn and Debbie Reynolds,

seeing other transgender people who had come out were the inspiration for their coming out.

Navigating Selectively Coming Out. Pringles and Zinniah were both out in some spaces, but not all, due to various reasons. The first person Pringles came out to was “somebody who I was dating at the time.” This person was also genderfluid. The second person she came out to was her mom. Pringles also shared they were out to some friends and slightly out on social media. Similarly to other participants, Pringles came out to people who were already queer and/or transgender due to perceived safety. There was also perceived safety with her mom due to her mom having some gay brothers. On the other hand, she has not officially come out to her dad, due to fears of rejection. “That whole afraid of [not] being accepted by someone, you know, love, that definitely applies to my dad,” she shared. She explained that her dad “isn’t very open viewed” and “still a very traditional Christian at heart,” providing some reasons for her hesitancy to come out to him. Additionally, Pringles stated that “he’s fairly conservative when it comes to LGBTQ standpoints. You know, he said he’s very far left in everything else.” Pringles’s quotes highlight the complexities of navigating safety, conservative views, and Christianity.

Pringles also described some specific instances that made her feel fearful of coming out to her dad. One was: “when I told him like, recently, there has been news about the Pope...basically telling LGBT youth that they’re valid and telling their parents, that they’re strong... I brought that up, he kind of scoffed, you know, like, (scoffs), maybe not like that, but more a lot more judgmentally.” For Pringles, this was a sign of rejection of her father not wanting to accept LGBTQ people as valid. Another event was:

“I don't remember the context of this joke...I said, 'I'm he-man'. And he was like, 'Oh, I thought you said I'm female'... was like, 'I didn't know I was that bad of a father'.” Again, Pringle’s examples highlighted a detrimental view her father had around transgender identities- that it would be his fault that he had been a “bad father.” Speculating about what it might be like to actually come out to him in the future, she thought her dad would think it was a phase. She also wondered what it would be like if he already knew, which she found out later he “sort of” did already know, but unofficially.

Pringles also shared her thoughts about navigating when she would come out to her dad, something she wanted to do. “I'm sitting on a bad boy piece of information, you know? (laughs),” she said, an undercurrent of secrecy painting her words. Timing was important for her:

I know I can't do it for about [four months]. Because the holiday season is already a stressful, but really special time for my dad...I don't want to add to the stress or like ruin the specialty of it...that sounds like something toxic. But that's, I kind of just agree. Because I feel like my dad would definitely see it as more of a negative thing.

This quote highlight’s Pringle’s thought process in navigating the complex decision making process around when she might come out to her dad. When deciding the best time, she stated that she was: “planning to officially come out around my birthday in January- as a birthday present to myself.” Until then, Pringles accepted that “there's just a general understanding that my mom is going to deadname me. And that is fine. Because I would prefer that than being outed out of nowhere.” This last quote elucidates the

importance of Pringles being the one to decide when to come out, as well as the importance of not outing someone before they are ready.

Zinniah was also mindful about which spaces she/it was out in. Zinniah had been out to her/its family since first grade, which they were all supportive of her/it. While Zinniah stated she/it came out to very close friends, especially those who were transgender and/or gender expansive themselves, she/it was very selective about who she/it came out to. Explaining her/its reasoning, Zinniah stated: “the reason why I don't come out as trans to my friends or at school is not because I don't feel safe. It's because it would change the way [people see me]. It's really personal for me.” Again, Zinniah's quote highlights the importance of safety in coming out; additionally, it highlights the fact that Zinniah still feared being seen as different for her/its gender identity. For her/it, she/it “want[s] people to think that I have a vagina.” This statement illuminates Zinniah's thinking around wanting to be perceived by other people as female, which was what her/its gender identity was. She/it did not want her/it coming out as transgender to change people's perceptions of her/it. Continuing she/it stated: “if I do come out, of course, most people will go like, 'yeah, of course, you're a girl'. But there will be some dickheads who would think of me as [not a girl].” Additionally, Zinniah did not want the label as trans to define her. “I don't want people to be like, 'Oh, she's a trans girl, by the way',” she/it stated. This last statement showed Zinniah's desire to be seen as the multi-dimensional person that she/it was, and not be trivialized into a one-dimensional aspect of herself/itself. Overall, the participants' coming out stories varied, their experiences ranged widely, and their reasons for choosing who and when to come out to (or not) were all deeply personal and complex.

The Reactions to Coming Out. As unique as their coming out (or not) stories were, so, too, were the reactions they received. Almost all the participants experienced having supportive[ish] reactions, although even these were complicated. While many had supportive[ish] reactions, they also had unsupportive reactions to coming out. This highlights the variety of coming out experiences, as transgender and/or gender expansive people navigate coming out throughout their lives, continuously navigating responses from others. The researcher chose the word ‘supportive[ish]’ because even within the most supportive families, there were still growing pains. To highlight the complexity in coming out experiences, each participants’ experiences and various reactions are presented simultaneously.

John Joe’s reactions varied widely. He shared that while his dad was somewhat supportive, his mom and brother did not acknowledge his transgender identity. He stated that his family did not use his name and pronouns. Outside of his family, he reported that his trusted adult was very supportive of his transgender identity; she also consistently used his name and pronouns.

Lynn reported that he had a very supportive family, especially since they had three transgender children including Lynn. When asked what it was like to have a supportive family, he shared: “I don’t know what it’s like not to have support. And so I think of this is like totally normal. And everybody else is weird. (laughs).” Lynn’s parents were supportive of Lynn’s exploration, gender transition, and legal transition. Even so, Lynn’s grandparents were still trying to understand, because “they were born in 1942” and “they didn’t have this, this is new.” In this quote, Lynn was referring to the generational differences with his grandparents’ generation and his own. As such, Lynn

celebrated the small victories: “grandpa introduced me as his grandson for the first time, so, I’m very happy about that.” Overall, Lynn was one of the participants that had the most familial and peer support from the moment that he came out.

Mx. Peacock also had parents that were “super supportive.” For them, “both times I came out they bought me like a cake to celebrate. The second time they bought me a cookie from... this bakery [with the genderfluid flag on it].” While their parents were supportive, there were also some growing pains. “My mom complained about like the ‘they/them’ thing for a while [because of the grammar], but then she realized it was kind of making me sad so she stopped,” they explained. As for extended family, Mx. Peacock shared that “my grandma and my grandpa on my mom’s side are like really sweet. Especially my grandmother, she just kind of loves everyone which is nice.” Further expanding, they shared that their maternal grandparents are supportive, but their gender identity “kind of just went over their head.” The other side of the family was not so supportive of Mx. Peacock. “The other side [of my family] is more tough love, but they’re also farmers, have been forever,” they stated. Calling their relationship with their paternal grandparents a “balanced truce,” Mx. Peacock explained that they “struggle with pronouns, but kind of use they right name.” They also said they mostly do not talk about the fact that they are genderfluid with these family members.

Comparatively, Mason’s family was also supportive, although they did not quite understand the complexities of their gender. “Like they understand that I’m not a boy or girl, but they don’t really understand like agender or anything. I don’t think I’ve even tried to explain it to them yet,” they said. Even still, Mason’s family started using their pronouns right away. Their parents’ response when they came out: “cool. Not shocked.

(laughs),” they said. This experience highlights the importance of supporting transgender and/or gender expansive adolescents even without a “full” understanding of gender.

Mason was also out at school to their teachers and some friends. Mason shared that their teachers were: “really supportive honestly, it's just like they don't get my pronouns correct all the time, which is understandable.” Aside from their teachers, Mason stated that they were not fully out at school due to “transphobes,” as they did not want to “deal with them.” This experience echoes previous sentiments around safety with coming out being paramount.

Debbie Reynolds experienced a wide range of responses when she came out. This is what she shared about coming out to her mom:

And I told my mom on accident. I was in my room crying and she heard me... She said, 'What's wrong?' And I told her I'm transgender and...it's like, oh shit, I didn't mean to tell you that. (laughs). And she's like, 'Well, you can't go back now.' And I expected to hear 'Oh, you know, you're mentally ill or whatever'. My mom told me 'We'll get through this'.

Her mom defied her expectations, especially due to the past gender role enforcements where her mom had told her that she would look ugly as a girl. Later, after coming out, Debbie Reynolds shared that her mom apologized for those past comments. Debbie Reynolds also described what it was like to come out to her grandma: “when I came out to my grandma... she goes, well, 'I thought you were going to come out as gay.’”

Although her grandma took some time, she “eventually started using the right name” and corrected herself “most of the time” when she deadnamed Debbie Reynolds. Lastly, Debbie Reynolds explained how she came out to her dad and his reactions: “I came out to

my dad and I said, 'but I'm not going to talk to you if you're not going to treat with respect and use my preferred name, etc.' And he uses my preferred name.” This quote illuminates the importance for continued self-advocacy as a part of the coming out process. Overall, Debbie Reynold’s family was much more supportive than she thought they would be.

Additionally, Debbie Reynolds also experienced unsupportive reactions when coming out. “And a lot of people said: 'Are you sure?'," Debbie Reynold shared when she told people in her life that she was transgender, highlighting the societally oppressive narrative that young transgender and/or gender expansive people do not know their own experiences. The reaction she received from her paternal grandmother was also the “hardest part” of her coming out story. “[My dad’s] mom. That was the hardest part. I've been close with my grandma [name]. Yeah, my entire life. She's done everything for me. I came out to her and she left me at Panera...She left and got in her car,” she shared. For Debbie Reynolds, this rejection was especially painful. The examples Debbie Reynolds gave about her coming out experiences are a poignant example of the myriad responses one person can go through.

Zinniah received relatively positive reactions to coming out throughout her/its life. She/it shared how her/its family and school peers navigated her coming out. “The second that I came out as trans [when I was 7] when I told my mom she accepted and she was like, ‘Okay’. And then she told my brother, and then, we told my brother that 'you now have a sister'... I'm glad that my family has been supportive,” she/it stated. Reflecting on her/its family’s support, she/it said: “I have had it easier than maybe other

transgender kids, cuz it's just my family was just really accepting.” Her/its family even moved to a better state to support Zinniah:

we moved to Colorado and then like this was a better place for me trying to transition. And when I moved here like a new school, second grade, everybody knew that I was a girl. When we moved maybe I did like still like a few boyish things. Mostly it's just been me being a transgender little girl with pink stuff and like dolls.

Zinniah continued to experience feeling supported as she/it got older as well. “The middle school that I went to there was a nice big group of gay kids. But it was still very accepting because my principal was actually a lesbian,” she/it explained. When reflecting back on her/its life, Zinniah said: “I do remember in first grade that I might have been bullied for being transgender.” Further telling her/its story, Zinniah stated: “yeah, I think I do remember that there were some people around me in my life during that time that didn't understand or kind of just had looks of disgust,” she/it said. For Zinniah, most of these experiences were distant memories and the memories of support were the ones that stood out the most.

Henry shared more about their extended family and the supportive[ish] nature of their reactions. “On my mom's side of the family. We just kind of like don't talk about it. Like they know, they haven't, like said anything about it to me,” they stated. Continuing, Henry shared: “except my grandma. Like, she's old. Like she, she mixed up my name before I changed it.” Henry declared that this was still offensive. Henry shared the reaction of one family member they thought was going to be unaccepting: “she was the one I thought would be like worst about it...she doesn't care, she cares more about my

happiness than any of that, I guess, which is really nice. So she's like, she calls me by Henry and all of that.” Again, this quote highlights the ambiguity of coming out and trying to predict the reactions of others. The most supportive person, Henry shared, was their “eight year old sister, and like, she’s so good about it.” Henry believed that “kids are always the best with it,” in terms of acceptance for people who are transgender and/or gender expansive. For Henry, and many additional participants, they felt that homophobia and transphobia was learned, so children were naturally more accepting.

Although many people in Henry’s life were supportive[ish], they stated that their “grandpa on my dad's side, um, is he had some issues with it.” Further sharing about this experience, they described:

Oh, my God, he sent me this letter while I was here, I think, I think I threw it away. I don't know. I don't remember. So, um, he sent me this letter. He was like: 'oh, you're too beautiful to be a boy.' 'I'll always remember you as my granddaughter' and like, (sighs), what else did he say, like, (pause) 'if you're confused, just have a long, long think about it, because nature doesn't make mistakes'. So I sent him back, like three pages worth of explanation about what being transgender is. (laughs). He's actually better about it now...He still doesn't want to call me Henry. But now all of the concerns have been more on. He's like really concerned about the fact that this is going to like make my life harder, I guess. Like, he sent me a letter that was like, like telling me like, you should get like a non, a non, non-gendered, like, nickname cute nickname, and you should smile more and be nice to people. And I'm like (laughs) (pause) I guess thanks? I don't know...And now he's been sending me a bunch of letters about my future

job prospects. So I guess we're just ignoring it. Um. Which is fine with me.

(laughs).

This quote highlights the nuances and intricacies of how Henry navigated coming out with their grandfather, and the responses their grandfather gave.

Aside from being out to her friends, Pringles was out to her cousin and her mom. Explaining her cousin's reaction, she said: "my closer family, my cousin on my dad's side, [name] she knows. And she's posted things on Snapchat, that was like, 'I love my cousin, she's like a sister to me. And it's like 'awww'. Which is, I'm kind of the closest thing she has to a sister." Pringles shared that her mom was also "really supportive" of her, and has even been involved in picking out Pringles' chosen name: "I thought it'd be kind of appropriate for her to name me now. Um, and she liked that one." In this quote Pringles was explaining that she thought since her mom gave her deadname, she wanted her mom involved with her chosen name as well. Pringles also shared that while her mom has been very supportive, she had to "assure her" that her being transgender was not her mom's fault. Lastly, sharing the reaction of the first person they came out to, who she was dating at the time, Pringles said: "we were in a class and I was just like, 'Hey, I think I'm a girl'. And they immediately just gave me a hug, and then started looking at gaffes." Overall, of the people Pringle's had come out to, she had relatively positive experiences.

Valdin shared that he/they experienced a lot of struggles, including bullying when he/they came out. "When I started getting bullied for it, I went back into the closet right away, because people were not nice about it in fifth grade," he/they shared about the first time that he/they officially came out. Continuing, he/they said: "so since sixth grade, I was on and off, but I would wear skirts still." While Valdin tried hard to protect

himself/themselves by going back into the closet, he/they also fought hard to continue to live as authentically as possible. As the/hey continued to come out when he/they were older, he/they continued to experience reactions that invalidated his/their gender identity.

For example, Valdin stated:

I legitimately came out during that class being like, you notice I'm a trans kid, right? I'm male and female. There were like, how can you be both? Like, sure you think that, but I am...it's a big part of me, that like, of course, like, my gender doesn't define me, but it is a part of me. So please respect it. Please respect me.

Overall, Valdin struggled a lot with peers when coming out, had some support from his/their family, and had some LGBTQ friends that were supportive as well. In sum, these experiences highlighted the complex reactions participants faced when coming out in various spaces in their lives. Only one participant, Lynn, described experiences where they felt truly supported, accepted, and validated in their identities since coming out. All of the other participants had varying responses, often ranging from supportive[ish] to unsupportive within their own circles.

Theme Two: Navigating Identities and Experiences of Oppression

This superordinate theme explores the participants' rich narratives surrounding their multiple intersecting identities. Participants shared what it was like to navigate the world with their gender identities, racial and ethnic identities, religious and spiritual identities, and their sexualities. These narratives included how participants' experienced different forms of power, privilege, and oppression in their lives.

Gender

Many participants shared their general experiences with, and opinions of, trans oppression. At times, participants combined experiences with transphobia and homophobia, since it could be difficult to understand which historically oppressed identity was being targeted. Additionally, participants discussed ways they had experienced microaggressions and invalidations of their gender identities. Quite a few participants talked about their fears, violence they had experienced, and negotiating safety. Lastly, Lynn shared how “being trans makes things slightly harder.”

Transphobia. For instance, Mason shared that they see how kids learn homophobia from their parents and are: “just repeating what [their] parents think.” Henry later shared similar sentiments around how children “learn transphobia from school and parents.” Mason felt like people had to come out as transgender as well, sharing: “you can't really just start transitioning unless you're out of your parents' household. Even then you have to come out to like a therapist because you need a gender dysphoria diagnosis...to get like, meds and everything for the most part.” For Mason, they were able to share how they conceptualized the barriers that TGEY can face when deciding to come out and transition.

Pringles also shared about how she internalized transphobia from her conservative upbringing, and that she still struggled with changing those internalized narratives. About this experience, she stated: “I was, just in an environment that didn't approve of that...I realized later on that those weren't exactly my opinions I was reflecting it was just kind of like, 'if I say this, I'll fit in.’” This quote highlights the complexities of internalized transphobia and navigating a transphobic environment. Pringles was unable to be her authentic self, and needed to hide who she was, to “fit in”

and feel safe. As a result of this internalized transphobia, she felt like it “definitely made me come to terms of things quite a bit slower.” When she was out of that environment, she was able to start exploring her true self.

Invalidations. About half of the participants also shared their experiences with having their genders invalidated. John Joe had been invalidated when people told him being trans was “on trend.” For Mason, Henry, Mx. Peacock, and Valdin, all gender expansive and agender youth, they shared the almost constant need to prove that their genders were valid. Mason expressed: “it's fucking frustrating trying to back up your existence.” Elaborating, Mason stated: “it's just so like weird to me that I have to justify my own existence to people just to be respected and get like, basic decency out of people...from some people, not all people obviously.” For Mason, they felt pressure to justify that there are, in fact, “more than two genders.” Valdin also had many experiences of being told that his/their gender “does not exist.” In response, Valdin retorted: “so you think I'm just like, 'Oh, I want to be this? No, this is who I am today. This is who I am right now'.” Valdin confidently shared that his/their gender was “not a choice, it’s who I am.” Comparatively to Mason and Valdin, Henry also struggled with being invalidated. For them, they experienced being invalidated for being genderfluid and ace: “I got the in-between weird trans thing that a lot of people discredit as even being a thing. And then I got the ace/aro, which a lot of people are like, that's not LGBT.” This quote shows the complexity of having multiple historically oppressed identities. Lastly, Mx. Peacock proudly felt that people should be able to explore their genders, and not have their experiences invalidated, even if the labels and words changes. These experiences

highlight the ever permeating cisheteronormative societal expectations and messages that participants had to navigate on a daily basis.

Safety. Many participants also shared how they navigated safety, including the fear they felt, and violence they experienced. Henry feared for their own safety, even if they needed to call the police for help. This was illustrated by the following quote:

if I'm ever in trouble, if I'm ever in danger, and I want to call the police or someone who can help me, I don't know that they're going to help me, and I don't know that they're not going to hurt me as well. And...that shouldn't be something I have to worry about.

Contextualizing these remarks further, Henry expanded that cisgender people take things like calling the police for granted, as they are unlikely to be discriminated against for being transgender. Henry also worried about future job discrimination and how this would impact their life. They stated: “I'm more afraid of the person who would be like hiring me would be like, ‘Oh, you can't do that here. Because like, think of the children’. I hate the think of the children line.” For them, they felt like children are “the ones who are the most accepting”, and do not actually need to be protected. The “think of the children” line seemed rooted in the potential hiring person’s own prejudices, as well as internalized transphobic messages.

Debbie Reynolds had experienced so much harassment and discrimination in her life that she had seriously considered taking her own life. Describing her life since coming out, she said: “oh yeah, I've been out for over two years. And these two years have been hell, practically, with a lot of the stuff I've gone through so.” Debbie Reynolds recounted one specific instance of being harassed in the bathroom:

But I remember when I was getting harassed. When I first started...transitioning, going into my junior year ... I was leaving a stall. And this girl asked me to show her my vagina. And I was like, 'what?' She goes 'well, if you don't have one, then you shouldn't be in here'.

This example highlighted the discrimination that Debbie Reynolds faced for trying to use the bathroom. Unfortunately, Debbie Reynolds had also been falsely accused of sexually assaulting two girls, which made her last two years of high school “hell,” even though she had been found “innocent within a week.” Debbie Reynolds described what happened following those false accusations: “I lost people close to me. I was kicked out of improv. I was, I just had to deal with a lot of things that I, now that I was finally getting to be me and be happy. Why is this happening to me now?” Essentially, this was one of the most devastating experiences of Debbie Reynold’s life, and had far reaching consequences. While Debbie Reynolds did not think the false accusations happened because she was transgender, she explained how her experiences were connected to her loss of male privilege: “I was no longer a white male, that I could be targeted much easier. That's what I truly think it was. Even though most these people were LGBTQ people who were doing this. I was the president of the Gay Straight Alliance.” These quotes offer some of Debbie Reynold’s perspectives on why she was targeted against.

John Joe and Lynn also discussed how they navigated safety. John Joe shared the pressure he felt to pass as cisgender so that he could stay safe. About this, he stated he needed to: “dress a certain way or speak a certain way or walk a certain way to not have my safety compromised.” For him, passing was “the priority” for his safety. He spent various amounts of energy trying to ascertain his environments so that he could stay safe.

Lynn shared about a sexual assault that happened where his boss had grabbed him inappropriately at work. Reflecting on that experience, he stated: “I don’t know whether it was [because I’m trans] or not”, highlighting the subtleties of various types of oppression. Lynn tried to have empathy for oppressors in general, sharing that humans are “predisposed to fearing what we don’t know.” Additionally, Lynn shared that cisgender people will “never understand what it is like to be born into a body that isn’t yours.” He further shared that he thought “being trans made things slightly harder”, such as having to navigate hormones, which are expensive, name changes, and “the misunderstanding in general.”

Lastly, Valdin and Mx. Peacock shared some of their experiences with navigating safety. Valdin shared about verbal harassment he/they experienced where he/they were called derogative slang words: “I like wanted to confront them. But I'm still too scared because I am a trans kid who is small. Who is genderfluid, queer, and nobody really likes.” While Valdin was outspoken and passionate, fear kept him/them from being able to address the harassment he/they faced. Lastly, Mx. Peacock shared how they navigated the intersectionality of being a young trans person:

Honestly, right now it's kind of scary being in the world as a young person in general, especially in a group that seems like half the world hates, but it's nice to have some confirmation the other way around that people do accept you, but the bigoted morons are a lot louder, because they will not shut up.

This quote from Mx. Peacock highlights how they navigated the dichotomy of feeling acceptance and hate within the same world. Altogether, many participants experienced various forms of oppression and discrimination in their lives, which included violence.

Based on the ever prevalent trans oppression and gay oppression in our society, many participants worried their safety could be compromised; things that cisgender people “take for granted”, Henry said.

Positive Experiences, Validations and Representation. While many participants experienced transgender oppression, there were also positive experiences. Mx. Peacock, John Joe, and Lynn were able to share about positive experiences and validations they experienced in mainstream society. John Joe shared an experience with acceptance in a generally cisheteronormative space:

In a menstrual cup community, which is like big... cis female dominated, 99%, and it's like a multiple hundreds of thousands of people community, is, um, like entirely trans inclusive, and they on the spot, delete everything that is gendered, or toxic, or gross towards trans communities. Which is super cool. It's really cool to have like, a moderator of this half a million people group being like, 'Hey, dude, there's trans people'. And I see all the time, cis women in there, like, 'Wow, I've never heard of that, thank you for sharing.' And that's some, that's some solid authentic exposure. It just is really cool. I have shared in those spaces, because it's been like it's, it's a really great space.

This example tied into how John Joe previously expressed a desire for a less segregated society; as such, this quote shows that John Joe wished for all spaces, even traditionally cisheteronormative ones, to be inclusive.

Representation of queerness was also important for other participants. Mx. Peacock shared appreciation for some representation in *Stranger Things*. They shared how they thought the cast was representative for them: “the cast of characters is not very

typical because they're all nerds.” If the representation did not exist, Mx. Peacock shared, then they and their friends would make their own. Lynn shared about personal connections and relationships he had made that would not have been possible if he did not come out as trans: “I’m happy I’ve made the connections that I have that I wouldn’t have made if I wasn’t trans.” Additionally, Lynn felt validated and comforted by the increased visibility of people who were trans in mainstream society: “a few years ago, the statistic was like six in 10,000 people were trans and now they're all over the place. It's like, awesome.” Representation, for them, was very powerful, as also highlighted by this quote: “I'm proud that there are people out there who are changing the world and giving representation to what we didn't think existed.” Seeing transgender people, queerness, and nerdiness represented and respected in mainstream society, in traditionally cisheteronormative spaces, was powerfully validating for these three participants.

Sexuality

In this sub-theme, participants shared about how they came to understand their sexual, affectional, and/or romantic orientations, how they described these identities, how they navigated coming out and the reactions, and how they navigated the world as non-heterosexual. All of the participants in this study that shared their sexualities identified as something other than heterosexual.

Exploring. In terms of realizing that they were non-heterosexual, most participants discovered their sexuality by dating, reflecting on crushes, and exploring labels. Zinniah shared that she/it started “discovering” her/its sexuality in “seventh and eighth grade.” As part of this process, she/it stated that she/it “always knew that I fit with a unique sexuality.” In trying to describe her/its sexuality, Zinniah said: “my sexuality

started coming in when I started having crushes...And then I started adding some more things to it. I started feeling like I'm a lesbian, but I also am attracted to people that could be non-binary, transgender." Like Zinniah, Mx. Peacock also reflected on past crushes to realize they were queer: "my realization that I was queer...really funny...because...I looked back on the first female crush I had and was like, wait, hold on (raiser finger up like has an idea)." This quote captured the exact 'lightbulb moment' where Mx. Peacock connected their experiences to their sexual orientation. Henry also explored their sexuality through dating and found it to be "a lot easier" than figuring out their gender identity. "I already knew what they were I think I learned what ace and aro was in like seventh grade. And I was like, yeah I'm that," they said. Further sharing their story, Henry said: "I thought I was demiromantic for a couple years and then I dated a girl for a year. And by the end of it, I was like, I'm not that." Like the other participants, Pringles learned that ace was "a thing" and figured out that label fit her through dating. Of that story, she shared: "[I] realized I was Ace while I was being very strongly come on to by my partner at the time... And I was like, hey, (laughs) so basically, can we don't [sic]?" Lastly, Valdin felt like his/their sexuality was complicated by their "sex addiction", so it was "really confusing for a long time." He/they dated in middle school in high school to figure things out. He/they stated: "[I] then came out as bi, and then realized I was pan. And then I figured out my gender stuff a little bit after that." While there were some variations in the participants' realizations that they were non-heterosexual, common threads including figuring out who they were through experimenting and learning about the different labels for sexualities.

Description. In terms of figuring out which labels best captured their experiences, that was slightly more complicated for some of the participants. For Mason, they “just identify as queer...that way I don’t have to like actually try and like, label it really.” For Zinniah, finding the exact right label proved difficult:

I've always had trouble figuring out, I don't know if I'm a lesbian, or I'm bisexual, or pansexual, but I'm, but I lean towards more pansexual or polysexual. So all of those can come together like one day you're a complete lesbian and other days, um, yeah, so it can change.

What she/it did know was that she/it had her own “custom sexuality”; she/it had landed primarily on abrosexual, which has “many different sexualities incorporated.” “It’s basically the magical sexuality”, she/it said. All-in-all Zinniah was very reflective and wanted to find the right label(s) that truly captured the uniqueness’s of her/its experiences. Valdin felt that demisexual was the best label for him/them. Describing his/their sexuality, Valdin said:

I'm demi, because I don't feel sexual urges towards anybody until I really get to know them... [I] don't care about gender one bit (laughs) when it comes to my romantic partner, like, I don't care if they're male, female, somewhere in between, or somewhere else out of the spectrum completely... I'm going to love them if I love their soul, so why should I care about their gender?

This description of what the word demisexual meant to them highlighted the unique personalization of each label to the beholder. Lastly, Pringles found that in addition to being asexual, she was also a lesbian. She described that while she was asexual, she was also “still very romantic.” She added: “I'm not a big fan of dudes. So I was like, I guess

I'm [homoromantic].” For her, while she was asexual, she also wanted to still date girls. Therefore, lesbian and asexual were the best labels for her experiences. All things considered, many participants used complex descriptions of their sexual, affectional, and/or romantic orientations.

Coming out. Five participants also shared what it was like to come out with their sexualities. Similar to their coming out stories for their genders, the participants’ coming out stories here were varied and nuanced. Pringles shared that while she was not officially out as transgender to her dad, she had been out to him as asexual for about a year. His response was that he did not think asexuality was real. That was “unacceptable” she stated. Sharing his reaction, Pringles said: “he's just like, oh, you just go to an art school. So you just need to have a thing. Right? Everybody's gay there. You just need to have a thing... but you're not actually gay. So you went with the one thing you could identify with as not straight.” This quote illuminates some pieces of dominant discourse around the sexual orientations of youths being phases, trends, and invalid. Valdin also had a stressful coming out experience. Of that time, he/they said: “when I started coming out, it was a bit of a chaos mess, because I was a mess.” Continuing, Valdin said: “[I] came out, uh, different sexuality, went back into the closet.” He/they had unfortunately experienced bullying to such an extent that he/they needed to go back into the closet for safety.

Mason shared that they had been “out as not straight since I was like, 10.” Of that story, they shared they “just decided to randomly” come out to their “entire class the first day back” from spring break. They shared: “And I like cried doing it...nobody even like heard me through my crying cuz I started crying before I got it out.” They had been

anxious about coming out to their entire class. When they came out to their parents, they had been supportive as well. Mx. Peacock's family was also accepting when they came out as bisexual. They stated their parents' reactions were: "both times I came out they bought me like a cake to celebrate." As for Zinniah, she/it felt like she/it "didn't really have to come out" because she/it "felt safe." Zinniah's mom was accepting of her/it when she/it came out as bisexual, and then again later when she/it said she/it was a lesbian. In terms of coming out to her/its friends, Zinniah stated: "all of my friends were already gay, so it wasn't really coming out of the closet." While these three participants experienced acceptance when coming out, their experiences were still nuanced. Even so, these five participants' stories ranged from complete acceptance with a celebration cookie to experiencing such bullying that they went back into the closet.

Navigating Oppression and Heteronormativity. A few participants shared their experiences with navigating oppression and dominant heteronormative messages. Mason was able to vent frustrations around even needing to come out at all. To this point, Mason said: "I mean, it's kind of weird to even have to come out. Like I understand like, coming out like as trans, but like coming out as gay just seems so odd that you even have to." Continuing, Mason shared their thoughts on coming out as a part of cisheteronormative society: "because like you never come out as straight, because it's just the societal norm because we live in a heteronormative society. So it's just like, the norm like everybody's straight, right? Kind of thing." Lastly, Mason understood that: "it's not that people are actually gay more often. It's just they're more comfortable labeling it and like, telling people about it."

Some participants shared about oppression they had experienced resulting from homophobia. Debbie Reynolds and Valdin shared their challenges with dating. These included things like ghosting, falling in love, and heartbreak. For Valdin, he/they felt like he/they would harm himself/themselves in relationships and “self-sabotage.” He/they also had a “sex addiction” which made things more “complicated.” Debbie Reynolds also shared about her unique experiences dating as a trans person. Oftentimes, it seemed like Debbie Reynolds experienced dating people who wanted to keep their relationship secret:

He always told me how much he liked me, but he never wanted to go public, and that frustrated me so much. I would see him messing around with other girls. It's like, okay, you see me like a project. I'm not. And I'm not a sidepiece. I have too much of a big personality to be a sidepiece.

Experiences like this left Debbie Reynolds feeling like an experiment. She said:

I said 'you're a chaser', and he goes 'what's that?'. I said you only went after me because I'm trans and you wanted that experience...And there's lots of girl chasers, but it's not more of a chase, it's more of a they're trying it out...My biggest issue though, has been a lot of times these girls are straight, which just makes things really bad.

These two quotes highlight how people she had dated had internalized transphobia and homophobia, where they liked Debbie Reynolds in secret, or dehumanized her into an experience to be had. While Debbie Reynolds experienced a lot of heartbreak, she also felt like she was the “perfect in-between” due to not having “gender confirmation surgery yet.” In saying this, she was acutely aware that this was her experience, and this would be very offensive to other people who were transgender. Lastly, Debbie Reynolds felt

strongly that nobody “is 100% straight unless they’re being homophobic against their inner desires.” To highlight this sentiment, she said: “sexuality is a spectrum. I’ve had sex with way too many straight girls for it to be binary.” While Debbie Reynolds expressed frustration at her dating experiences, these additional quotes highlight how she made sense of those experiences. In sum, while Debbie Reynolds and Valdin had experiences that were typical dating experiences for many adolescents, like ghosting and heartbreak, he/they also had unique experiences centered around their gender identities.

Lastly, Zinniah and Pringles shared some harmful stereotypes they had heard about dating. Zinniah said she/it had seen, probably on Instagram, messages that conveyed: “asexuals are broken, bisexuals can’t decide, and polysexuals are picky.” Pringles said that she had heard: “lots of people assume like that, that aces are just like, absolutely, like...either horribly, horribly awkward or the kind of people to commit arson.” For her, she said she was a bit awkward, but did not want to commit arson. She had also heard that “all aces have top energy”, which was not characteristic at all. These messages highlight just a few added challenges the participants had to navigate while dating.

Race and Ethnicity

Three of the participants, John Joe, Valdin, and Pringles identified as bi-racial. John Joe identified as Native American and white. Valdin identified as Chicano and white. Pringles identified as Mexican and Caucasian. The other six participants identified as white and/or Caucasian. Most of the white participants shared about their race in the context of political advocacy, specifically the Black Lives Matters movement. Those stories are covered within that theme. In this theme, John Joe, Valdin and Pringles shared

the ways they navigated being biracial. Henry and Zinniah also shared about their Caucasian heritage as well. For the participants that identified as biracial, similar themes emerged. These were focused on the participants navigating being white-passing, how they made sense of their racial and ethnic identities within their current political climate and how they navigated their racial and ethnic identities within their families and with friends. Valdin also shared how he/they connected to, and understood, his/their Chicano identity, while John Joe pondered the intersectionality of being transgender and part Native American. Lastly, this theme shares Henry's and Zinniah's experiences navigating their whiteness.

Being White-Passing. All three of the biracial participants shared their struggles with being white passing. This came with the feelings of not feeling like they 'belonged' in either 'category'. This was particularly illuminated in the ways John Joe talked about their racial identities. "My racial identity is not a huge part of my life, even though it kind of is", he said. Additionally, John Joe shared that being white-passing made it hard to tell others that he was BIPOC and claim that label. He shared: "[I] wouldn't really tell people that I identify within the BIPOC community even though Indigenous is in the BIPOC community, which is wild. And I would kind of identify as indigenous as like a main identifier." The hesitancy in claiming the label of BIPOC as a white-passing Indigenous person comes through in the previous quote. Valdin expressed similar feelings of not belonging within either racial or ethnic identity: "Oh, yeah, you're not white, but you're not Chicano, You're not Hispanic either'. So it's interesting to be in the in between area too." Also Hispanic, Pringles felt similarly. "I've definitely had, like, crises where it's like, should I even identify with this? Half of me? Literally, like, 40% of me", she said.

These comments related to John Joe's hesitancy of claiming his BIPOC identity as well. Interpreting more of her feelings about that, Pringles said: "I mean, to the logical part of my brain is ridiculous. But to the emotional part of my brain makes total sense. Because it's like, well, people have been telling you, you're not really Mexican. So it must be true." Additionally, Pringles shared how there was a general message in society that if a person is Mexican, they must speak Spanish. The "Spanish test", she called it. Sharing about a time in which she had to navigate the Spanish Test, she said: "I've seen that in middle school myself, where like, every time I would say something, say that I was Mexican, uh people would always say, 'all right, speak Spanish right now'. And I'm like, 'can't'." These experiences were so invalidating it caused Pringles to question her own identities. For all three participants, being white-passing and being bi-racial caused lots of internal conflict, shame, and confusion around navigating who they were and what identities were 'valid'.

Navigating Contextual Factors. All three participants shared their views and experiences with navigating their current political tensions as a biracial person. During the time of data collection during 2020, racial tensions exploded in the United States and around the world, leading up until the 2020 presidential election. John Joe focused on Black Lives Matters, while Valdin shared about his/their views on the treatment of Hispanic people in the United States. Pringles shared about both issues. John Joe stated: "I feel like more "woke people" feel more responsible and guilty for the culture that was overtaken from Native Americans than they did for Black or African American culture." These sentiments highlight the complexities of racial tensions, racism, and "oppression contests" within dominant society and communities of color. His specific response to

Black Lives Matters was this: “it's just a lot of emotions. It's like overwhelmingly frustrating, and also exciting and overwhelming, and something I'm super passionate about, and also like super disgusting, some of the things that are happening.” He wrestled with wanting to be more politically involved, while also not seeming like he was “speaking for” BIPOC people as a white-passing person. Similarly to his trans identity, he “wish[ed] again that I could be seen as human in, in being indigenous.” This quote relates to sentiments by John Joe around feeling dehumanized for his historically oppressed identities.

Valdin also reflected on the dehumanization of his/their historically oppressed Chicano identity. Valdin shared that he/they wanted to “reject” the things that had happened politically during the previous four years. Exploring his/their feelings on the children being kept in cages at the border, he/they said: “I hate it because it's dehumanizing. And it's like, it's not a thing that should even happen like, like, how does it even process in people's minds to be able to dehumanize somebody so much, but they've been doing it throughout history without learning?” For Valdin, he/they did not understand “what’s wrong with somebody coming from another country?” He/they also reflected on what could have happened to him/their family if they had immigrated during this time instead of in the past.

Pringles shared that while Black Lives Matters was not new during that year: “just more attention being paid to it. Like I, my parents, and I have been pretty vocal about it since, since I can remember really.” For her, racial tensions had: “been something that's just sat in the back of my head for as long as I know.” While she shared that her family did not explicitly talk about race, it had been implied within their

conversations. For instance, she said: “that's kind of just a given almost, that most people in authority tend to be white.” In terms of the general treatment of Mexicans in the United States, Pringles said it was “difficult” to see children in cages at the border. “My mom's biological dad was an anchor-baby”, she said, leading into her nervous wonderings about what would have happened to her family if she immigrated from Mexico now instead of the past. Both Pringles and Valdin felt stressed and anxious imagining what could have happened to their families.

The participants also shared how they navigated being biracial with family and friends. Valdin shared that he/they didn't learn that he/they was Chicano until he/they were 11. “I had a whole entire part of my identity sealed away from me for a long time,” Valdin shared about the experience. Valdin stated that his grandmother would “refuse to speak Spanish,” and his dad stopped identifying as Hispanic. About that experience, he/they shared: “my dad doesn't say his, he's Chicano anymore. He doesn't say he's Hispanic. But I do because I believe it's a part of my history.” For Valdin, it was important to reclaim that part of his/their identity.

Pringles shared that she would ask her friends if they thought she was white or Mexican and get mixed answers: “I commented on my TikTok,... I asked them, if they believe me when I said I was Mexican, and some people are like, ‘yeah, you look hella Mexican’. And other people are just kinda like, ‘mmm you just look white to me.’” These mixed responses likely added to her confusion around how to connect to her racial and ethnic identities.

John Joe shared his struggles with his dad being Native American and mom being white. He shared his frustrations that his mom “is racist,” and how she will stop him from

doing 'Native American things'. About his mom, John Joe shared: "it's her perspective of she just like a really closed minded, and also ignorant perspective, is really frustrating, and like infuriating." As a result, John Joe shared that he felt "more connected to" and "heard" by his dad. In sum, all three participants had to navigate their racial identities differently in their families and with their friends. For John Joe, having a racist mom was very difficult for him. For Valdin and Pringles, they struggled with connecting to their ethnicity due to their families trying to assimilate into American culture.

Connecting to Racial and Ethnic Identities. Some of the participants also shared the ways in which they felt connected to and made sense of their racial and/or ethnic identities. Valdin discussed how he/they was able to connect to, and learn more about, his/their Chicano identity. He/they shared that he/they loved learning Chicano/Hispanic history. He/they described one of their favorite memories learning about his/their ethnicity with his/their dad: "I remember him teaching me how to make enchiladas the first time... That was one of my favorite experiences with him was him teaching me how to cook a dish that I know was part of my history, too." Additionally, learning that he/they was Chicano, helped him get more connected to his/their spirituality as well, especially to the goddess Santa Meurte. About getting more connected to Santa Meurte, he/they said:

it is a part of traditional culture. And also because she is actually a Mayan goddess. And like, there's more history to her than what most people see on the surface... Because like most people see her as the saint of holy death. And like, some people who are Hispanic or Mexican, they are like, No, no, no, no, no. But I

have the view of this is a Mayan goddess. She's just been reincarnated as something else.

Additionally, he/they talked about appreciation for learning about the smaller pieces of their Chicano identity, such as his/their “increased tolerance for spicy foods.”

John Joe had not had much interaction with the indigenous community since coming out as transgender. In pondering what that would be like, he reflected that it is a part of Native American culture to “respect your elders.” He shared that he was curious to “see how that goes” someday. Overall, while these three bi-racial participants had similar experiences, there were also idiosyncrasies within their stories.

Two participants, Henry and Zinniah shared about their whiteness and cultural heritage, and how they made sense of those identities. Henry shared about being white and their Finnish heritage. “I'm very, very white. I am whiter than an unseasoned chicken breast,” Henry said about their racial identity. They shared how exciting they found it that their family was from Finland. They also shared: “I love their like mythology, and I love their traditions and stuff.” An example of Finnish mythology that they loved was: “the Finnish translation is a soul bird. And they're like, um, birds that like they carry you into this life and then they protect you from the dangers of the world.”

Zinniah was able to share about her family heritage from Europe as well. About her heritage, she said: “I'm Irish and I'm Scottish. And I'm German, and I have a bit of Russian just, um, my dad knows that he's that he has a bit of German in him because his mom's last name before she got married was a German name. I forgot what it was it started with a, with a G.” Most of the white participants did not speak directly about their whiteness, even Zinniah and Henry. These participants shared some of their cultural

heritage. When participants discussed their whiteness in this study, it was in relation to Black Lives Matters and the oppression of BIPOC people.

Religion and/or Spirituality

In this sub-theme, participants shared their views on, and experiences with, religion and spirituality. This included how participants were raised, as well as their current beliefs, views, and practices. Some participants shared how they grew up with Christianity, such as Debbie Reynolds and Henry, whereas Zinniah shared her/its experiences with growing up non-religious. Additionally, many participants discussed the intersections between Christianity and being LGBTQ. In terms of current beliefs and practices, one participant, Pringles, identified with a dominant religion, Christianity, while the rest of the participants identified as non-religious, atheist, agnostic, Pagan and/or Wiccan. Lastly, one participant with an alternative religion shared their experiences with discrimination.

Growing Up. Three participants discussed the ways they grew up with religion. Debbie Reynolds and Henry shared about what it was like to grow up as Christian. For Debbie Reynolds, she explained that she “literally went to newborn church...all the way until when I was 12.” When she was younger, these were her beliefs: “I was devoutly religious for most of my childhood. I was anti LGBTQ. I was your typical ‘Crazy Christian’. And then I started questioning things and moved forward in my life.” She also shared about her family’s’ beliefs in evil, and how her haunted childhood home shaped her spirituality. For Henry, who also grew up as Christian, they were: “like Christian for a long time because my parents are Christian and I kinda got forced into that one.” Elaborating on that experience further, they stated:

I didn't want to keep going to church because...I was like atheist. And I was like, Mom, I don't really want to go to church because I don't believe in any of this stuff. And she's like, No, you still have to go to church. And then she told everyone in the church that I was atheist (laughs). So people were like, coming up to me and being like, I know you've lost your way.

That experience had been uncomfortable for them.

Zinniah shared about what it was like to grow up non-religious. She/it shared that her dad was atheist; she/it went through an “atheist phase,” and then started to figure out more of what she believed. About that experience, she stated: “as I get older, of course, in middle school, I was discovering what I believe. And I just knew that I didn't really believe in God.” Zinniah’s experience was consistent with Debbie Reynolds’ and Henry’s; all three participants had adopted their parents’ views to begin with and then started exploring their own as they got older.

Navigating Christianity and Being LGBTQ. Debbie Reynolds, Henry, and Pringles shared how they navigated being Christian and LGBTQ, and/or their thoughts around this. Henry believed that it was not Christianity itself that was “anti-queer.” Instead, he believed: “I think a lot of the Christian Church has kind of lost that meaning.” Further sharing what they meant, Henry said:

I'm not entirely sure if the Christian Church in a bigger sense ever had that meaning of being nice to everyone, and ‘don't judge other people,’ and ‘accept your neighbor for who they are’...and there's a lot of people who use their religion as an excuse for hate. And a lot of those people are going to be like, Christian. And that sucks because I don't think something like religion should

ever be used for hate... I feel like religion should be like, a personal thing. And like a thing that like, helps you love, and not something that like, makes you hate. That sucks that like that's a thing. Yeah and...a long, long time ago, a lot of people were like, 'Oh, it's okay to have like slavery and stuff because Bible says like, in Christianity, white people are better'... Jesus wasn't even white! (laughs). For Henry, they viewed a lot of people who practiced Christianity as using their religion as an excuse for hate and the perpetuation of oppression against LGBTQ people and people of color.

Debbie Reynolds had much more personal experiences with the Christian church's views on LGBTQ people. She shared about her experiences being "kicked-out" of church for being *perceived* to be gay -- before she had ever come out. This was what she stated about that experience: "and then I got kicked out of the youth group because I was taking part in "homosexual activities." I hadn't even done anything yet. It's just I came across as really feminine. So they were like, 'Oh, he's gay'." This was incredibly painful for her, as she shared how she felt abandoned: "[I] felt abandoned by my church. That's what kind of led to me being an agnostic. Also, the fact that I was questioning the church and I was really making them upset." She also described that the experience led to a lot of "heartbreak" due to the loss of her "church family." While Henry and Pringles had different experiences with direct oppression or witnessing oppression by people who practiced Christianity, they both ended up leaving Christianity for these reasons.

Pringles, in contrast to Debbie Reynolds and Henry, shared a somewhat more positive view on Christianity; for her, the pope publicly supporting LGBTQ was very validating. About that moment, she said: "the pope coming out and being like, LGBTQ is

valid. And that that was really very affirming, for me since Christianity is basically a strain of Catholicism.” Like Henry, Pringles also believed that Christians who are anti-queer were ‘anti-Christian’. Pringles also thought that President Trump was an “antichrist” sent to “trick Christians into believing non-Christian values.” Additionally, Pringles shared about how they reconciled the historic oppression of LGBTQ people by the church and their beliefs:

the original Bible was written in a very, very archaic form of Latin. Um, so new translations are coming out more and more...Like, the verse...the famous one that conservatives like to quote “man shall not lie with man,” actually now translates to “Man shall not lie with boy,” which is a very different setting, giving context.

For Pringles, she had been able to find parts of the Christian church to be validating.

While Henry no longer identified as Christian, both Henry and Pringles were able to reconcile that Christianity itself was not inherently homophobic and transphobic. They were both able to parse out gay and trans oppression from the religious beliefs themselves.

Current Beliefs and Experiences. Of the participants that shared about their current religious and spiritual beliefs, all but Pringles reported having non-dominant religious views and beliefs. Debbie Reynolds and Zinniah both did not identify with any religion at the time of data collection. Debbie Reynolds shared that she was agnostic and “more spiritual.” About her beliefs, she stated: “I know evil exists, but I don't know if I believe in the whole God/higher being thing.” Zinniah shared that she/it was mostly “non-religious,” “but if I do go through religion, it's agnostic or atheist.” Describing her/its beliefs, she/it stated: “I still don't really believe in the Christian God, or, like a

higher being, but that's when it comes to being agnostic. I am agnostic about a higher being. I am agnostic about so many things that I don't have answers for.” Additionally, Zinniah said that she/it believed in things that she/it “has proof for”, such as things backed by science. Zinniah also said she/it was currently exploring lots of religions including Buddhism, Pagan, Hindu, Jewish, and Confucianist. For Debbie Reynolds and Zinniah, they both were open to spirituality and exploring their beliefs.

Debbie Reynolds, Henry, and Valdin all reported being Wiccan, while Mason shared about their experiences being Pagan. “I'm a Hellenistic pagan,” Mason said. They liked being a Pagan due to its “close ties with witchcraft” and how it could be different for everyone. In terms of their beliefs, they said: “the Greek myths are what I subscribe to.” As part of their Pagan practices, they: “just go out in nature and experience it. I don't know. There's no like, special thing I do.” Henry shared that while they were not “super, super, super Wiccan”, they “believe in about half the stuff about Wicca.” They said they “believe in like kind of the archetype of god and goddess.” Sharing more, they said: “both the God and the goddess are kind of like part of everything around us and they influence everything and they're always like with me and always helping me.” In their view, the deities in Wicca were “like a part of you.” Similarly to Mason, Henry liked that Wicca was very “nature-based. It's very outdoorsy.” Valdin, who was Wiccan as well, had beliefs similar to both Henry and Mason. Valdin: “work[ed] with deities who are in the Greek gods area, the Greek goddesses.” Sharing about his/their favorite deities, he/they said: “Gaia is the goddess of the earth and Nyx is the Goddess of the moon and dark, and the stars and it's so amazing to, like, just be able to look at the beauty that a goddess created for me.” His/their “favorite thing about Wiccan” was “the rules.” This

was his/their favorite rule: “when you do something to harm another or do something to harm yourself, you get it three times harder back at you... that just means so much to me.” For their practices, they did various offerings, writings, and meditations to the different deities, as well as used Tarot cards and celebrate certain holidays, like Samhein. These three participants had similar beliefs and practices. Like many of the additional labels participants used to capture their identities and experiences, their religious and spiritual identities were unique to their experiences.

Valdin also shared about his/their experiences with discrimination due to practicing Wicca. He/they shared: “One of the hospitals I was at, they didn't allow me to have my tarot cards, even though it's right to religion.” Reflecting on the possible reasons for this discrimination, he/they stated: “it's because they were ‘witchcraft’. So when they're witchcraft, people have satanic beliefs with them.” He/they were especially frustrated since another person in the hospital could have her Bible, while he/they was unable to have his/their spiritual artifacts. These experiences of discrimination highlight some of the experiences people with non-dominant religious and spiritual beliefs can face in society.

Lastly, Pringles shared about her experiences being Christian. For her, the favorite parts of her religion were: “community...and having that belief that there’s something there...like a higher power.” She also felt that Christianity: “generally, it's somewhat of a good moral code to live by.” She felt that there were “a lot of very inspirational parts to the Bible”, as well. She shared about one of her favorite Christian stories and the meaning behind it: “it means to help yourself, and He'll help you, basically, is what that comes down to.” All in all, building community and feeling supported and connected was

important to Pringles. In sum, many of the participants were connected to religion and/or spirituality. They all found ways to personalize their beliefs and find things that truly resonated for them.

Generation Z and Youth Oppression

Many participants shared their experiences with being a part of Generation Z, which intersected with their identities as being youth. Although many of the participants were self-assured, passionate, educated, and confident in their beliefs, they shared experiences of being invalidated due to their age. This included the feelings of not being taken seriously, being told their opinions were not valid, feeling like they did not have choices, and being told what to believe. They had these experiences within their own lives, and felt the general effects of youth oppression within their broader social contexts.

Lynn shared that he felt like “as kids we’re being forced into a box.” Mx. Peacock shared that they heard messages that “your opinion doesn't matter, and you don't, and you're not valid.” They also shared this resounding message from the world: “in a world where at least the media that is shown a lot of the time is not necessarily against my identity, but against the "young people" who are trying their best to do things in a world that doesn't think they're deserving of it.” This quote highlighted the complexities of hearing messages that society in general invalidated youths’ experiences and did not think they “deserved” to be a part of that world. In terms of youth oppression, Henry also shared their experiences: “it's very much the 'ha, you don't understand these things yet. So we're not going to bother telling you about them' or, like, A: I actually do understand them. Thanks. B: I have things I would like to say if you would listen?” These two

responses Henry gave point to important truths: that Generation Z did know a lot about what was going on in the world and they had a lot to share about it.

Zinniah and Pringles also shared some examples of not having a voice with adults in general. Pringles gave this example:

Most of my problems with not having a voice come to my parents. They're, they're a bit or at least my dad is ...a bit more totalitarian with, like, my mental health. And like, I try and ...be like, 'this is kind of what I need right now'. And he's just kind of like, 'you're me'. That's not true. It's like, just because we have the same thing on the Myers Briggs personality test doesn't mean...we are similar emotionally, but... they're not the same. Like, we both need different things.

For Pringles, her experiences with invalidations centered around her not knowing her own self, or her needs, and that her parents knew better for her. In terms of not having much of a voice around adults, Zinniah said: “adults do that to teenagers a lot. Those are just the kind of adults that I hate when they're like 'let the adults talk'. Just because I'm a kid or a teenager it doesn't mean that I can't have an opinion.” This sentiment shared by Zinniah ties into the above quote by Henry; they were both declaring that even though they were young, they did have opinions and important things to share with the world. Joe also felt like he “isn’t heard by society”, and that he definitely had “some experience with not having any say over my safety and situation.” Lastly, John Joe felt that “society has a weird perception of being a minor and trans.” This last quote also tied into the participants’ experiences in the next paragraph.

In terms of knowing and understanding themselves, a few participants shared that they felt invalidated by adults. Lynn stated that he was: “afraid of being seen as

confused... and that 'it's just a phase.' Mx. Peacock also shared thoughts on this topic: "I've heard that sentiment mostly around the idea that 'identities can still change'. But there is also the undertone of like, 'Well, you can't know for sure yet.' Um, which like I kind of get that, but also it's invalidating." Connecting this to their own experience, they explained: "it's the reason why I don't have a legally changed name, even though my mom's supportive because she just, she just wants to make sure that it doesn't change again, which I get that, but it's also annoying." Lynn and Mx. Peacock were both touching on how the pervasive sense of invalidation of youths' experiences in society has impacted their experiences.

Mason and Zinniah also connected their experiences of youth oppression to the political environment at that time. Mason shared a lot of frustration around the upcoming election. Mason wanted equal rights and was frustrated that the people voting would affect their future while simultaneously not affecting older people's "future at all." It seemed incredibly invalidating to care so much about what was going on in the world, yet not being able to be a part of any decisions around what would happen in the future. Zinniah stated: "society actually hasn't really been giving Generation Z and millennials voice with BLM. Because they think that we're too young, but really...we've been growing up these newer ideas, so we should have a voice." This point from Zinniah gives some reasoning as to why Generation Z should have a voice and be taken seriously. In sum, many of the participants were passionate, informed about the world, and had a lot of opinions to share, while simultaneously being told by adults in society that they were "too young" to have opinions.

Navigating Identities within the LGBTQ Community

Many participants also explored navigating being a part of the LGBTQ community as a TGEY. This included experiencing oppression as well as representation and safety. Mx. Peacock and Henry shared that there were some “competitions for suffering” and invalidations in the community. For instance, Mx. Peacock shared:

And even within the queer community...they're trying their best to exclude people just because they felt excluded. Which doesn't work like that. And it feels not fun...it's a weird almost oppression contest... I've seen that mostly with like, you know, radical feminists who don't support trans women or people in the queer community who don't accept asexuals, like who cares?

This quote evidences how Mx. Peacock felt about how their own community was engaging in these competitions for suffering. Henry also noticed these “oppression contests” within the LGBTQ community. An example they shared was: “I've seen a lot more stuff online of like, like, even trans people saying, like, 'Don't pretend to be trans for attention'.” Another example they gave: “I think the one going around right now is like, if you don't want to have surgery, then you're not really trans. And it's like, (pause) well, no.” They said this internalized transphobia “really sucked.” While they had been out before they saw these harmful messages, they reflected on the pain this would cause others: “it's just really sad that...younger kids are going to be seeing those and going through so much extra pain because their own community is telling them that they don't belong.” These examples highlight the participants’ reactions to internalized transphobia within the LGBTQ community.

Many participants also identified positive experiences and feeling a sense of belonging within the LGBTQ community. This included the power of seeing representation in the world, finding queer spaces, and feeling like the LGBTQ community supports Black Lives Matter. Mx. Peacock shared about a queer Harry Potter LARP (Live Action Role-Playing) group they had been a part of: “did a Harry Potter LARPing thing where a couple of members of the cast are trans and they're really accepting and a couple of the other characters are playing in a lesbian relationship.” They also shared about one of the proudest moments of their life within that community:

I had one of the weirdest but also like, proudest moments of my life there because one of the members of the cast that is transitioning did so after I told them... 'hey, I'm going to be going by a different name and pronouns. So if you see me outside of this call me this'. And based on that email, um, one of the members of cast came out as a guy, and is now transitioning... ‘terrifying, happy, unsure how to respond’.

Mx. Peacock, although proud, had also felt uncomfortable that they were the representation and inspiration for another cast member, when the group had been a place of representation and inspiration for Mx. Peacock in the first place. Zinniah also felt proud of the LGBTQ community. “it’s not as boring as straight people”, she/it said. Providing examples, she/it shared: “there's a lot of things that people are into that define [the LGBTQ community], like witches. There are people who are Pagan, drag queens... There are, so you've probably seen furies.” For her/it, the LGBTQ community offered a place of acceptance for her/its identities and interests.

Some other experiences of positive representation in the LGBTQ community that the participants shared were of seeing transgender representation. Debbie Reynolds felt especially connected to Walter Mercado. Describing him, she said: “he was like androgynous, really popular in the Spanish community...sometimes he looked like a woman, sometimes he looked like a man.” John Joe turned to YouTube for a lot of representation. An example he shared was about trans YouTuber Jammi Dodger, who posted videos about their experience as a trans person, while their partner shared videos about what it is like to date a trans person. John Joe said this about Jammi Dodger: “[I] have shown some important people in my life that video that was a helpful way for me to communicate some things in knowing trans people and being respectful.” So, not only did John Joe use the videos for himself, he also used them as a tool to help people in his life understand him. Lastly, Valdin shared broadly that “being able to see” gender expansiveness in the world allows him/them to be able to “fluidly” explore his/their own gender and expression. In sum, acceptance and representation within the LGBTQ community helped many participants feel validated in who they were.

Mx. Peacock focused on the intersectionality of internalized racism present within the LGBTQ community as well. They highlighted how “white-washed” the non-binary and community has been. This further elucidates the oppression LGBTQ people of color can face, even within the LGBTQ community. Elaborating they said: “first person that threw the brick at Stonewall was a trans black woman, and we have never heard of her”, talking about Marsha P. Johnson. These highlight how Mx. Peacock was navigating internalized oppression within the LGBTQ community.

Zinniah, somewhat contrary to Mx. Peacock's sentiments felt that the LGBTQ community was accepting and supportive of people of color. Zinniah stated: "the LGBT community is...a marginalized group, as well...So the LGBT community actually supports Black Lives Matter, which is great." Another sentiment that Zinniah shared in contrast to Mx. Peacock was: "a lot of groups are accepted by the LGBTQ community like asexuals, which is great." These differences in experiences show the complex and unique experiences everyone can have within the LGBTQ community.

Theme Three: Navigating Mental Health and Physical Health

The third superordinate themes explore the participants' narratives around mental health, trauma, neurodiversity, physical health, and experiences with mental health treatment. All of the participants had experienced struggles with mental health, neurodiversity, and/or trauma. Three participants had physical health difficulties and/or disabilities. Many participants shared about depression, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, anxiety, gender dysphoria, and/or disordered eating. Half of the participants also shared their experiences with trauma and coping with it. Three of the participants also identified as neurodivergent in some ways. Lastly, some participants shared about their experiences with mental health treatment. Participants also shared about their experiences being LGBTQ within mental health treatment. The last main narratives captured by this theme are three participants' experiences with physical health difficulties and/or disabilities.

Mental Health

About two-thirds of participants shared their experiences with mental health. The mental health concerns discussed included: depression, including suicidal ideation and attempts, anxiety, gender dysphoria, and disordered eating.

Lynn, Debbie Reynolds, Mason and Valdin shared about their experiences with depression and suicidality. Lynn stated that his depression was also coupled with anxiety and gender dysphoria. He shared: “nighttime is worse for me anyway with depression, anxiety and dysphoria.” Valdin shared that his/their depression caused him/them to “lose sight of progress” he/they had made, which was difficult for him/them to experience. He/they shared about trying hard to “stay positive”: “I’m like, let’s keep it positive today. Because I’ve been in really good mood ever since we went outside for PE. And so I’ve just been chilling and talking to people and just making sure that I’m feeling good with myself.” Valdin was committed to learning ways to manage his/their depression in treatment.

Debbie Reynolds, Valdin, and Mason all had histories of seriously contemplating attempting suicide and/or attempting suicide; this was a third of the participants. Debbie Reynolds shared that she almost attempted suicide because she was afraid of coming out, which was further detailed with her coming out story. She also contemplated suicide due to the bullying and harassment she endured, as captured by this quote:

It was so bad that I was like, ‘fine, I’ll just kill myself and it’ll stop’. They get so pissed off and upset when I’m successful, because they don’t think I deserve it. All these, all those people say ‘I can’t wait for you until you run for public office so we can just destroy you.’ And it’s like no because I’m open and honest about

everything that's happened. I don't have any skeletons in my closet. The closets were opened a long time ago and the skeletons are there on the floor. (laughs).

This quote also shows how Debbie Reynolds conceptualized the reasons behind why she was targeted, and how she has learned to be open about her experiences to ward off further harassment. Valdin briefly mentioned his/their history with suicide attempts and ideation. Additionally, Mason shared that they had been hospitalized in the past because “I tried to kill myself”. These three participants shared their struggles with depression and suicidal ideation.

Lynn, Henry, and Valdin all shared their struggles with anxiety. Lynn’s anxiety centered around being around people and being very ‘detail-oriented’. As an example, Lynn stated he tended to: “overcomplicate things, detail-oriented and I don’t see the obvious answers, I don’t do obvious things.” When asked what it was like to live with anxiety, Lynn stated: “it's been a part of my life. I was diagnosed at the age of six. I've had it pretty much my entire life. I've always been anxious about other people.” Henry shared that they were “anxious as all heck...I've got a general anxiety disorder and it's bad.” They also shared that they “have pretty bad paranoia...so when I'm off my meds, I just think everyone is going to kill me.” Valdin’s anxiety centered around perfectionism and being ‘hyper-aware’. About his/their perfectionism, Valdin said: “as a perfectionist, and a person who takes on everything, it's a lot to carry.” He/they also shared that their perfectionism “drains me of all energy.” While these three participants struggled with anxiety, they were also aware of the impact anxiety had on their lives.

Lynn, Mason, John Joe, and Pringles also briefly shared about their experiences with gender dysphoria. For Lynn, their gender dysphoria was closely connected to

depression and anxiety. About this experience, Lynn shared: “the disconnect between the brain and body is not fun.” As such, Lynn struggled with “self-confidence” and difficulties “expressing pride.” For Mason, their gender dysphoria, body image issues, and suicide attempt were all closely intertwined. “My body image issues are, like, related to my dysphoria, like gender dysphoria, obviously”, they shared. They also stated their doctor made a comment about their weight and they “just ran with it”, leading to an eating disorder and suicide attempt. John Joe stated that they had gender dysphoria as well. Although Pringles stated that she did not get “dysphoric all that much,” she did experience some body dysphoria. She explained: “my voice, and my body. Those are the only things I get dysphoric about, because my voice is quite masculine. Um, even when I try to raise it.” Gender dysphoria can be an uncomfortable topic to discuss; this was evidenced by these participants’ desires to name that they experienced gender dysphoria without wanting to explore in detail.

Lastly, both Mason and Valdin had experienced disordered eating. Mason shared: “I think I have an eating disorder, but they wouldn’t diagnose me with one because I’ve only had it for like six months, and, like I’ve only had the habits for like six months and I’m not underweight so.” They shared that while getting treatment for it had been difficult in the beginning, they had been able to get a second opinion so they could get treatment. Valdin shared this about his/their eating disorder: “I have [sic] an eating disorder in the past. And I would binge eat or I would not eat at all. So yeah. So I’m still working through that one. But I’m getting much better....there are little goals.” In sum, almost all of the participants had been or were working through very serious mental health

concerns. Their different and intersecting mental health struggles reflected the similarities and dissimilarities in their life experiences and manifestation of mental health struggles.

Trauma and Coping

Mx. Peacock, Debbie Reynolds, Valdin, and Pringles also shared about their trauma and their coping strategies. Mx. Peacock shared that they were “semi-dissociated all the time.” Further describing their dissociation, Mx. Peacock said: “it's just kind of just like, you know, when you look through binoculars or a camera, and it's a slightly different focus degree.” This impacted their memory and ability to recognize emotions as well. They also shared how this impacted their gender identity: “impacts my gender identity a little bit, because it's harder to figure out what I feel like because my mind kind of slides if I'm already not aware of really what's going on in my head, or my body.” For Mx. Peacock, their experiences with dissociation impacted their life in various ways.

Debbie Reynold's trauma centered around childhood trauma, bullying, harassment, loss of relationships and being falsely accused of sexual assault. In reference to her trauma, she shared: “I get through it every time. I'm lucky that I (pause). I mean, it's good and bad that I've gone through all the crap I have in my life. It sucks that I never got to like fully be a kid.” In terms of being falsely accused, she felt like it: “almost completely destroyed my life. It was so embarrassing have to having to sit there in front of three fat cis cops and tell them my in-depth sex life. They wanted everything between the interactions with those two girls, everything, like minute to minute.” This experience echoes the shame and humiliation she felt when engaging with law enforcement. After proving her innocence, Debbie Reynolds explained that the harassment continued, which lead to a loss of relationships. She gave this example:

There was this girl that lived down the street from me my entire childhood that I went to high school with her, madly in love with her. We went on a couple dates things were going great. And then the rumors- just totally destroyed that relationship. I never fully got over it.

She also lost a lot of her friends. Of that experience, Debbie Reynolds stated: “the rate of false accusers is so small compared to actual sexually assaulted people... During Me Too. That was really hard for me to be like, I'm innocent, let me hang out with you guys again.” This quote shows how Debbie Reynolds contextualized her experience of being falsely accused during the Me Too movement. To cope with her various traumas, Debbie Reynolds would drink as well as “sleep around.” She shared: “Um. The biggest thing that happened was when I identified as male, to make myself feel better, I slept around a lot... It's because the big gaping hole I had all my life.” She also explained that repeatedly sharing her trauma with others was a helpful coping skill.

Valdin shared about his/their experience with sexual assault, and the bullying and harassment that later ensued. He/they stated: “until the beginning of 10th grade in which I had no friends because all my friends were in disbelief of my sexual assault happening. So, it was a really horrible time for me, in all honesty.” Both Debbie Reynolds who had been falsely accused of sexual assault, and Valdin who had been sexually assaulted, had lost friendships due to misbelief of their truths. To cope, he/they developed an addiction to alcohol and sex. About that experience, Valdin said: “[I] ended up having a sex addiction...which I really hate.” As he/they learned more about himself/themselves and his/their sex addiction, Valdin explained: “I was doing it to fill an empty hole in myself. That friends didn't, they weren't able to fill in, like the creative and the emotional support

and all that stuff, even though I never got that.” Both Debbie Reynolds and Valdin used sex as a coping skill and described their reasonings for this as ‘filling a hole’. Valdin’s friends encouraged him/them to get addictions treatment, as well as pouring out “all the alcohol in the house.” Valdin received treatment to work on their mental health and addictions.

Lastly, Pringles shared that she experienced trauma and had PTSD due to an incident with a school resource officer. She still “gets really anxious about them” and used to have flashbacks often, although things had “gotten a lot better” due to therapy. To cope, Pringles also said she put herself “into a state of emotional apathy.” Overall, quite a few participants had experienced trauma which impacted their mental health.

Neurodiversity

Many participants also identified as neurodivergent. This included having ADHD, Sensory Processing Disorders and/or Asperger’s (Autism). Zinniah was one of those participants. Zinniah said: “I have Autism, but I like to go by Asperger’s.” She/it shared why this label was important to her:

Autism is very misunderstood. And that's why I've been using Asperger's because people don't really think of severe, low functioning Autism. Like people when they think of Autism, a lot of people think of like, I'm in a wheelchair, and I have a helmet on my head, you know?

For Zinniah, not being defined and confined by any of her/its identities was incredibly important. To iterate this point, she/it gave the following example: “And then you say that 'she has Autism'. It's like you're speaking for me...So like, 'this is the Autistic girl.’”

These quotes show how Zinniah pushed against the societal norm of being dehumanized into only being known as one of her/its identities instead of as a whole person.

She/it also strongly felt: “neurodiversity shapes my personality.” As examples, she stated that she/it “thinks out of the box most of the time” and is a “visual learner.” Being a visual learner, she/it said: “is the most important thing about me.” Zinniah was also proud of being “linguistically talented.” She/it loved learned languages “ever since I was a little kid.” For her, she/it recognized the unique talents that came with her/its neurodivergence.

In addition to being proud of her/its neurodivergence, Zinniah also experienced some difficulties. “Having Autism. It’s really hard”, she/it stated. She/it stated that: “having Autism includes having a very, very hard time explaining how I feel, or just describing things ...Autism, Asperger's is mainly just a communication disorder.” Due to these differences in communication, Zinniah often felt “misunderstood.” In addition, friendships and relationships were also challenging. To illustrate this point, she/it stated: “some people just don't like being around me. Or they just feel uncomfortable around me.” Additionally, she/it “always had drama” within friendships, and experienced bullying. This had “always” been in her/its life, even when Zinniah was younger. She/it shared: “ever since elementary school, I've always had drama...Because being at school, and interacting with other people is really rough for me because of my Autism.” Additionally, Zinniah described: “I am very misunderstood. And I have had so many dickhead teenage boys, just basically torment me.” These examples paint a picture of the challenges Zinniah has faced, mainly interpersonal, due to her/its Asperger’s.

In conjunction with Asperger's, Zinniah had mild synesthesia, ADHD, and OCD. For Zinniah, ADHD and OCD were a "package deal" with her/its Asperger's. An example she/it gave about how her OCD showed up for her was: "I do get compulsive when it comes to organization, and how things are placed next to each other, or just certain things can bother me if they're off." Additionally, Zinniah stated: "my ADHD is also kind of included with the package deal because I can be really hyper sometimes." Zinniah had recently discovered "a few weeks ago" that she/it had "mild synesthesia." Describing her/its synesthesia, Zinniah said: "a lot of people with synesthesia have a color to go with their number. So four for me, gives me blue. One is either yellow or purple. Three is green. And two is red." Additionally, she/it could also hear colors: "because when I hear something sometimes, I feel like my brain does automatically replace something non-visual with something visual. So when I hear someone sneeze, I think of a very light orange. When I hear someone cough, I think of a dark navy blue." She/it approached her/its synesthesia with appreciation and wonder for the unique ways she/it could engage with the world.

Henry also shared that they were neurodivergent. Henry's neurodivergence was in the form of "Sensory Processing Disorder, SPD." Although Henry felt that "SPD is...not like a huge, difficult thing for me" in the present, it had been harder when they were young. Sharing about that experience, they said: "sensory stuff was a lot harder when I was like younger, when you're like a kid and you don't know how to deal with it. And like nobody around you knows what's going on because SPD isn't really a commonly known." They did share that every once and awhile they would get judged in their life at present: "I stim, right. And like, one of the things I do that I've got, I've got in like,

judged for that. It's weird, like, waving my hands around, buddy.” Overall, though, Henry did not experience a lot of discrimination and oppression for their SPD.

Like Zinniah, Henry was also proud of being neurodivergent. “I’m very proud of that community,” they shared. Explaining further, they said: “I feel like the community has overcome like so much. And it's just like, especially for a lot of people it's like a really hard thing and they've gotten a lot of hate for it and they just keep moving. And it's really inspiring to see.” They also declared how they believed Autism Speaks further oppressed the neurodivergent community by their messaging on “‘pushing for the cure’ -- which most autistic people don’t agree with.” Sharing more about that, Henry said: “There's always been a problem with like, caregivers and like, specifically parents, I think, who are like, “Oh, poor me raising my, raising my child with autism” or whatever it is, like, seeking all the pity and stuff. And Autism Speaks does a lot to like, put their voices out there instead of actual autistic people.” This point connects to other types of oppression by dehumanizing and stripping away the voice of the person with the historically oppressed identity.

Both Debbie Reynolds and Pringles also shared their experiences with having ADHD. For Debbie Reynolds, it was more woven into her stories and her naming her distractibility during interviewing. For Pringles, her ADHD diagnosis was fairly recent. She said that her therapist thought her ADHD was “crippling.” She also shared her depression might also be a part of her ADHD by saying: “my major depressive might actually be a misdiagnosis. I might just have the fancy ADHD, which is interesting.” Overall, more than half of the participants had varying types of neurodivergence, another common experience for people with gender diversity.

Mental Health Treatment

A few participants shared about their mental health treatment, including their experiences being LGBTQ and receiving mental health treatment. Lynn shared that learning coping skills and taking medications helped him manage his mental health. Mason had been in an intensive outpatient program after being hospitalized for a suicide attempt. In terms of their treatment experience, they shared: “it's frustrating, but like I'm trying to recover, which is, it's like really hard,” and “I'm scared, but I'm hoping it helps.” Both Debbie Reynolds and Pringles mentioned having therapists as well.

Valdin and Henry shared about their experiences navigating residential mental health treatment. Valdin shared that he/they focused on the positives, learned coping skills, and used the hierarchy of needs. He/they said: “I'll be finally to that point where I'm taking care of myself emotionally, physically, mentally, and like, spiritually, and making sure that I am here together.” He/they also said “I deserve a healthy and happy life because I'm worth it.” Henry shared that what they learned in residential was “general self-care is a good idea. And like, taking my medicine is also a good idea.” This point also relates to the importance Lynn gave to taking medications, who had not mentioned whether or not he had been in mental health treatment.

In terms of navigating being LGBTQ while receiving mental health treatment, experiences varied. Mason shared: “I love my current therapist, because like, he's super like, I mean, he's pansexual himself. So he's like, it's like, great.” Both Valdin and Henry shared some struggles with being genderfluid in residential treatment, as the treatment center was separated by ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ floors. Valdin felt like people generally did not understand his/their gender identity when they came out in treatment, and that was “really

hard to deal with that.” Henry stated that “name and pronouns was pretty good” in residential. “Sometimes, they’ll mess up. But, you just correct them,” they said. While Henry “wish they didn’t” have gendered floors, they also said: “I understand why it had to be split up by gender in a lot of ways but it’s kind of weird.” Valdin also said this about his/their general experience in residential treatment:

all the trans kids basically gather[ed] up in a group sometimes. And we’re like, how are we feeling about this? Because there is some transphobia here. And there is some homophobia here, which is really scary, to be in a healing facility and still feel that. But we’ve started to get used to it, which sucks. We shouldn’t have to get used to it. We should be able to, like not have it in our world, but it happens because opinions and views.

This experience shows how distressing it was to be receiving mental health treatment while navigating homophobia and transphobia. Sadly, this quote also showed how oppression within mental health treatment had almost become a normalized experience for him/them. Valdin felt it difficult to express himself/themselves authentically in treatment as well. “I felt like wearing a skirt [there was] even weird,” he/they said. Elaborating further on that point, Valdin said: “because like, it’s sometimes like, ‘Oh, cool. I’m on the boys floor. And I’m wearing a skirt. What are people gonna think?’ So, yeah, I had a lot of second guessing thoughts.” Valdin even felt some struggles with other transgender and gender expansive people in treatment as well, who had expressed their internalized transphobia to Valdin:

another trans guy [in residential], had said something about heels being girly. And I was like, ‘No, they aren’t. Guys can wear them. Girls can wear them. Anybody

on the spectrum can wear them'. And it was pretty interesting to like, have that, like, have that different view from a trans person to another trans person.

This experience highlights the internalized transphobia, and cisheteronormative messages that all members of society have been a part of, including those who are also transgender. Of Valdin, Henry, and Mason's experiences in mental health treatment, they varied from positive, to relatively neutral, to negative.

Physical Health

Pringles, Mason, and Lynn shared their experiences with physical health and disabilities. Pringles shared her experiences with being born with Poland Syndrome. It is "gonna be weird to explain," she shared, since "the primary researchers on this don't actually know what causes it." She described Poland Syndrome was a "developmental disability." She explained she was born with some physical differences in her body. As examples, she stated: "when I was in the womb, from here forward to the rest of my arm, it developed weirdly"; and "I'm missing my left pectoral muscle." For her, having Poland Syndrome primarily affected her music journey. In general in her life, she tried to keep "a positive outlook on everything," and did not want to be dehumanized by only being known for her disability.

Mason shared their experience being an "11-week preemie." They shared about how they had lasting lung damage due to being put on a ventilator as a baby, and how they had frequent hospitalizations. Describing this experience, Mason said: "I've been hospitalized my entire life, so I have like trauma surrounding it basically. Cuz you know, I was 11 weeks premature, so I have lung damage...I don't think I've had a year for like my entire life where I haven't been hospitalized." Mason gave another example of how

their asthma and lung damage impacted their life: even when I was on vacation once when I was in China with my Grandpa, the air pollution caused my asthma to flare up. And I had an asthma attack. And I was like, I had to stay in the hospital for like, half a day.” As such, their physical health was especially salient to them due to COVID since they were high-risk.

Lastly, Lynn shared briefly that he was “supposed to be wheelchair bound” due to being premature. He shared that he was “one pound, four ounces at birth. So, I really shouldn’t be here.” For Lynn, he did not want to share much about any of his physical health. For these three participants, they all experienced being born with a disability, or experienced resulting disabilities from being premature.

Theme Four: Interpersonal Relationships

This superordinate theme highlights the participants’ complex interpersonal relationships. Participants’ shared about their family, friends, peers, and general dating experiences. More than half of the participants were from families who experienced divorce. Those participants were: Mx. Peacock, Henry, Valdin, John Joe, and Debbie Reynolds. Although these participants had all experienced divorce, their experiences varied. Participants also shared about their family relationships, including supports and things they did with their families. Additionally, the participants talked about their friends, most, if not all of which were also LGBTQ. Lastly, this theme explores some of the general dating experiences participants discussed.

Family Relationships

Numerous participants shared stories of positive connections, support, and general relationships with their families. Lynn and Zinniah briefly discussed the relationships

they had with their siblings. Lynn stated he had an older brother who was trans and a younger sibling who was nonbinary. While there was some tension with his brother due to his brother's "toxic masculinity" being "annoying," they generally got along. Zinniah shared that she/it had an older brother who played hockey and that he was "a little distant." Sharing more, she/it said: "we're siblings so of course we don't get along. He's really busy with hockey." They both seemed distant from their siblings.

Valdin and Debbie Reynolds talked about other family relationships. Valdin shared that he/they has a positive relationship with his/their dad, as they were both musicians and could connect on similar trauma histories. He/they enjoyed doing various things with his/their dad, like: "play card games, go on walks, all that fun stuff. Chill. Just talk sometimes. Because that's really nice to be able to do is just talk for a long time." Additionally, Valdin shared that his/their mom would be moving out of state soon, and that they were trying to find his/their support community in the new state. Debbie Reynolds shared that she felt cared for by her grandma, that her grandpa recently passed away, and that she had a "good relationship with my dad now- I never thought that would be a thing."

Mason shared that they and their dad watched horror movies together, had family game nights, and that their brother was ten years older than them. "We get along really well," they said of their older brother. "There's a lot of times we'll, where we'll play, um, like card games and board games as like a family with my brother and all of us," they shared about their family life. Mason generally felt supported by, and connected to, their whole family.

While Mx. Peacock shared about their parents' careers, they were more interested in sharing about their cat and dog. They said that they were pretty close with their mom, as "she was raising me as a single mom for a while." Although Mx. Peacock and their mom sometimes "push each other's' buttons," they are "closer to her" than their step-dad. In terms of Mx. Peacock's cat, they said: "she's still kind of a sweet girl. She will walk by for pets and makes me follow her. She is the talkiest [sic] cat ever." Additionally, their dog was "kind of a mop" and "the tiniest thing." Mx. Peacock explained that they have their dog because "my mom tried to convert me into a cat person and I didn't comply."

Lastly, Pringles shared about her experiences growing up as an only child with strict parents. Her difference growing up as an only child seemed much different from that of Mx. Peacock's. "The stereotypes of strict parents of only kids is true. Um, I didn't have regular internet access until about, um, February," she said. Expanding on her experiences growing up further, she stated: "they're both depressed millennials, one with ADHD. So, there's a fair bit of inconsistency in rules, and things are always changing. It's kind of hard to keep track." She shared that she also learned the following from her parents: "things aren't as big of a deal as they are made out to be." Sharing a story about this, Pringles said:

When I was a kid, they would, anytime I would, like, hit my head on the corner of a table, they would like, ask if I was okay. And then if I was, they would start laughing so that I would start laughing. So now every time I hit my head on something, or like fall, I just laugh or like, if someone, and if somebody like insults me, I'm just like 'that's probably true' (laughs).

She felt like this gave her resilience in life, adding: “anything can be positive if you just laugh at it enough.” In sum, the participants had complex family relationships and experiences.

Conflicts and/or Divorce. Many participants also discussed their experiences with divorce and/or family conflicts. For John Joe, “a large part of who I am now is that divorce and that move.” In his experience, his parents’ divorce was sudden and unexpected, as he, his mom, and his brother left their family home in one state and moved to another. He described the experience as “being ripped out of that environment.” After his parents separated, he did not get to see his dad which led to him feeling a loss of connection in that relationship. The whole situation was “wild,” he said. Elaborating further, he stated: “deep traumas that that had, that I’m, that I have been, that I am, and that I will continue to go and unroot is wild.” The experience had greatly changed his life. John Joe felt that he had no choices in the matter and was counting down the days until he turned 18 and could move back with his dad, and the state he grew up in. Through that experience, though, John Joe shared that it was influential in helping him understand his trans identity and who he was as a person. “I wish didn’t happen, but see what that brought me in my life today...in which I’m insanely proud and grateful for,” he shared.

Debbie Reynolds, who had also experienced divorce, shared that she “has such a broken” home. As she was growing up, she said she experienced “a lot of emotional turmoil.” One example of this was when Debbie Reynolds said: “the way my parents met was dealing meth to each other.” While her family was doing better, she stated: “now my mom works for [location] to help families in need. But my mom was looking at 30 years in prison when she was pregnant with me.” Additionally, Debbie Reynolds shared: “my

older sister's in prison for attempted second degree murder.” Reflecting on her family life, she felt like there were “lots of mental health issues in my family.” These experiences shaped how Debbie Reynolds was able to grow up.

Debbie Reynolds continued to experience conflicts and strain in her home even after her parents divorced when she was starting high school. Debbie Reynolds shared how her dad would “rant” about her mom, and how there was “a lot of rifts going on” between her and her mom. There had recently been a big fight at home in which her mom “threatened to kick me out.” She also tragically shared the story of a conflict with her aunt, who was her “number one person.” After her and her aunt got into a fight, she shared that she: “got kicked out at 11 o'clock at night. During a storm in the middle of red town, red America.” Continuing the story, she stated: “and it was like that place, that I had, I always went to my aunt's because it was my safe place. And I just lost my safe place. And I, I still think because I still have nightmares about that night.” Having such a huge fight with her aunt was devastating. “It was god awful. And to be talked to like that by my number one person. It was like it was like being stabbed,” she expressed.

Debbie Reynolds also discussed how her relationship with her younger sister was strained. “She's kind of grown up thinking you resolve everything by fighting. And she tries to fight me all the time,” Debbie Reynolds explained. During a recent fight, Debbie Reynolds stated: “she swung at me and I ducked, and I swung at her and punched her in the face. Shouldn't have done that.” While Debbie Reynolds had grown up with a lot of conflict, she also wanted to be able to respond to stress differently. Lastly, Debbie Reynolds shared that she felt unsupported by her family with her music. “people get really irritated and annoyed,” she stated. “I couldn't play at certain time in the mornings,

when my parents were together,” she reflected on the past. Debbie Reynolds was starkly aware of the lack of familial support. “So, it's weird having family that doesn't, you know, I see other kids that their families are so appreciative of their abilities. And with me, it's just kind of like, 'yeah', that's what she does',” she reflected.

Mx. Peacock was also from a family with divorce. After their dad had remarried, they felt like it: “was definitely a shift between zero and three [siblings when I got my stepsisters].” Having been an only child up until that point, it was an adjustment. About the experience they shared: “I used to get very overwhelmed. But also I was glad for the company because before I had to talk about things with adults and that was boring.” Eventually there was conflict between Mx. Peacock and their dad that lead to a loss of the relationship. “He tried to turn me against my mom,” they shared, echoing Debbie Reynold’s experience with her dad during her parents’ divorce. Although this was what prompted them to end the contact with their dad, they had also been frustrated with a “double standard” around scheduling, and their dad’s untreated mental health issues.

For Valdin, his/their parents’ divorce was: “a little t. So it was a little trauma. But like, it wasn't the worst thing in the world.” The biggest challenges for Valdin and his/their brother were the scheduling difficulties in the beginning. He/they stated: “we were never in one place for a long time. My dad moved so much. And we were moving back and forth between houses, along with moving all over the place. My mom only moved three times.” Living with their dad, at times, felt “sketchy,” “scary,” and “dangerous” depending on the neighborhood. All-in-all, having moved over six times with their dad had been difficult for him/them.

Valdin also shared how his/their dad was estranged from his mom due to family traumas. Sharing part of that story, he/they stated: “my mom and my grandma, were arguing so much about what happened to my dad as a kid. Like, now that I know what it was like, they were in denial of what happened. I'm like, holy crap. That's so messed up.” His/their family would split up holidays between their maternal grandmother’s house and their dad’s, until eventually they all cut their maternal grandmother out of their lives. Valdin described the impact this conflict had on him/them: “now that I think about it. I'm like, well, parents aren't always forever, like they can disconnect from you. And that's really weird to think about.” The experience seemed greatly impactful for how he/they viewed their relationship with his/their parents.

Lastly, although Henry came from a family of divorce, they shared that their parents handled it well and it was “very easy.” “My parents are reasonable people,” they shared. Although there were some fights, and “awkward tension,” they reported that: “my parents were really calm and mature about it for the most part.” Similarly to Valdin, switching homes seemed like the biggest adjustment for Henry. They said that it was: “kind of awkward to live into two different houses.” Even so, they felt that their parents “navigate it well, and I get to see both of them.” Overall, while more than half the participants experienced divorce and/or family conflict, their experiences were vastly different. Undoubtedly, all of these experiences influenced and shaped how the participants’ made sense of themselves.

Friends, Peers, and Dating

Many participants shared about their experiences with friends, peers, and dating. Almost every participant reported that they had a network of queer friends and supports.

This sub-theme also captures the ways participants navigated their gender identities with their friends and made sense of their connections to other people their age who were LGBTQ. Lastly, this sub-theme explores some general dating experiences.

Some participants generally shared about their friendships and why those were important to them. Mx. Peacock and Lynn described how they were naturally caring people who enjoyed supporting their friends. Sharing about this, Mx. Peacock said that they naturally like to take care of their friends and “be sympathetic.” They enjoyed helping people a lot and they “try to be kind.” According to their parents, they might care for their friends “too much.” Reflecting on this, they stated: “I have trouble with boundaries.” Lastly, Mx. Peacock shared that even though they enjoyed their friends, it could be hard to see them, often due to forgetting to make plans, their friends living far away, or they were busy. All of these experiences are examples of typical experiences within friendships.

For Lynn, he shared that he “has always been friends with the friendless.” Like Mx. Peacock, Lynn really enjoyed helping his friends. Although Lynn loved helping people, he was an introvert: I “only have 5 friends [that I talk to regularly], I’m good with that, that’s too many.” Lynn also shared about the pride he took in his loyalty: “I’m really proud of the fact that I’m really loyal. I’ve always been really happy with that.” He also talked about supporting friends, especially LGBTQ friends that did not have their own familial support. “I always check in with them. I cannot lose them. I will not lose them, I refuse”, he shared, highlighting the importance of checking in with his two transgender friends that had unaccepting parents. He felt a responsibility to support them so that they would not die by suicide.

Debbie Reynolds and John Joe gave examples of adult friends in their lives that supported them. Debbie Reynolds shared about one of her family friends that had been supportive. She could turn to them during family conflicts. “They’re such sweet people and they’ve always been such a good support for me”, she shared, the appreciation for them helping her when she was struggling palpable in her voice. Additionally, she said that: “all my friends that I’m really good friends with, are older than me.” For Debbie Reynolds, she had lost many friends her age due to the harassment and bullying she experienced. John Joe, did not know many people his own age that were transgender. His trusted adult was one of the most “influential” people in his life.

A lot of participants shared that they liked playing Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) with their friends, including Henry, Pringles, and Valdin. Valdin shared that he/they loved playing D&D with his/their friends. He/they also stated about his/their friends: “I care about them so much and I just I want them in my life forever.” Generally, the participants’ friendships were an important part of their lives.

“All my Friends are Gay.” Mx. Peacock, Mason, Zinniah, Henry, Valdin, Pringles and Debbie Reynolds all said that most or all of their friends were LGBTQ themselves. Lynn, while not sharing much about their friends directly, mentioned numerous friends who were also LGBTQ. Mx. Peacock shared that “it’s rewarding” and “nice” to have friends with similar identities. Humorously, they enjoyed how “funny” it was for all of their friends to talk about the same crushes. “Most of my friends are LGBT themselves,” Mason said, adding that they: “choose my friends very carefully.” Mason explained that while most of their friends were LGBTQ and out to their parents, “the parents aren’t supportive.” When asked about her/its friends, Zinniah stated: “all my

friends are gay.” Explaining further, she/it shared: “all of my friends from middle school, we've all been discovering each other's like sexualities. And so far, I'd say every friend that I can think of at the top of my head is gay.” Jokingly, Zinniah said: “I think I might want to have one straight friend, that would be kind of funny if I'm like, this is my straight friend, my only straight friend.” Other participants had joked about this as well. For her/it, having a community of gay friends was important. “I've actually been thinking after the Coronavirus, like after maybe next year, I would like to go to a bunch of gay teenager parties or just like, events, just gay events and make more gay friends,” she/it mused.

Henry shared that all of their friends are “queer.” Additionally, like them, some of their friends were also ace. This was important to them. They reflected back on their best friends’ journey to realizing she was ace: “cuz I remember when we were all like, first kind of exploring that together. She was like, I wanted to be asexual, but I got the opposite. And I'm like, thinking back on that, I'm like, I think if you want to be asexual, you're probably asexual.” Valdin had many LGBTQ friends as well. Sharing about his/their friends he/they said: “one of my other friends is genderfluid, but doesn't identify as trans.” Sharing about another friend, he/they said: “I have a trans female friend, and she is the most amazing person I know. I love her to death. I love her. So she's freaking awesome. And she's a badass too.” This admiration for his/their friends was also evident when they shared this about one of his/their friends: “they're just like, so freakin’ there in their space with their gender.” For Valdin, he/they admired and respected their transgender and gender expansive friends. Lastly, similarly to Zinniah, Valdin joked

about his/their one straight friend being “the token straight.” These remarks highlight just how different growing up in Generation Z was compared to different generations.

Similarly to the other participants, Pringles also had friends with similar identities. “Almost all of my friend group is bisexual. And then I pretty much, close friends wise, I had like, one cishetero friend, but then they came out,” she shared. Even though she celebrated her friends’ identities, she felt like sometimes it could be “difficult to keep track of” everyone’s different identities. “That's literally the only downside to it. I think it's just keeping track of it,” she said. Further expanding on those sentiments, she stated: “you know, if, if people want to be who they are, then I will make the sacrifice of clearing up some space in my brain for it.” This quote highlighted the importance of finding whatever ways possible to support other people in their life. Overall, the participants had numerous queer and transgender and/or gender expansive friends in their lives, highlighting previous comments that reflected that Generation Z was “gay”.

Zinniah, Henry, Mason, and Mx. Peacock offered some insights into why so many Generation Z LGBTQ adolescents end up with almost or all of their friends being LGBTQ themselves. Zinniah offered this pondering:

I think it's kind of either a coincidence or it was kind of predicted from the very beginning...And, like if you hang out with a group of people, you kind of just, you hang out with them because you like being around them. Like you all either like the same things or just have the same personalities...And then when you get older, you all find out that you're gay. So basically, it's kind of like, predicted being gay because like, I don't know, the weird kid group grew up being the gay kid group...that's why because you have been friends with them for a reason.

Because you all are kind of like the pre-product of a gay person, you're kind of like a little gay. And then when you grow up, you're like, 'Oh, this is why we're gay'.

For Zinniah, being friends with all LGBTQ people seemed more like it was both coincidence or predicted, not some trend or social influence like many adults might believe. Henry shared similar sentiments. “You just gravitate towards each other”, they shared. Additionally, Henry added: “it happens before you even know you're queer.” Lastly, for Mason, having all LGBTQ friends or allies was also something they had specifically chosen. They stated:

Yeah, I don't understand why people are friends with people they don't agree on fundamentals. I understand like not agreeing on some stuff, but on like, just because we don't agree on politics means we can be friends, right? I'm like, no, I believe in basic human rights. (laughs).

For Mason, they would not want to be friends with anyone who did not respect them as a valid person. Lastly, Mx. Peacock shared a view that combined that of Mason's with Zinniah's and Henry's. They said: “honestly, if there's any group that is kind of off of the norm, you can bet your butt that there are a lot of queer people mixed in there because they gravitate towards that. We want to find someone who can relate.” For them, it seems like finding friends within the queer community helps them feel understood, so it was only natural for queer people to gravitate towards one another. These participants' offer various perspectives for understanding why so many participants' had numerous friendships within the LGBTQ community.

While Lynn did not explicitly talk about friendships in this way, he also alluded to having numerous friends who were queer and/or trans when sharing how he supports his queer friends with unsupportive parents. He shared these thoughts about his trans friends with unaccepting parents: “it's sad but it's also infuriating, why is it so hard you know? It's still your kid...but still your kid's like the same person.” This quote reflected Lynn's confusion around not understanding how parents could not support their children.

Navigating Gender with Friends. John Joe and Mx. Peacock both shared how they navigated their gender identity with their friends and supports as well. John Joe reported having one supportive adult in his life who really understood and supported his trans identity but was not a part of the LGBTQ community. She's “an above and beyond supportive human”, he shared about her. Continuing he stated that: “she is one of the most influential people in my life and starting this job...in this local plant group Facebook community that I've been brought into with her... has been life changing.” For him, her relationship with his “trans identity was huge.” “She's still the most consistent person to use my name and pronouns”, John Joe shared, adding that she would consistently use them in front of people who misgendered him, including his family. The support of this one person was instrumental for John Joe, driving home the importance of having at least one supportive person in a TGEY's life.

Mx. Peacock discussed how they navigated their gender identity with their friends. They shared: “with the trans thing it's more been like me helping the other person through that.” They had been able to help one of their friends figure out their gender identity. “It was fun being able to talk to someone who had a similar experience”,

they shared. This sparked them to remember another incidence where they felt validated by their transgender and/or genderqueer friends:

Oh, I had a funny moment of realizing I was not like the only one who felt something because I texted one of the genderfluid friends from camp. I was like, 'do you ever have, like, a moment where you kind of forget you don't have a dick?' Like, 'you just like: confusion?' And they were like, 'Yeah', and I was like, 'great, I thought I was the only one.' (laughs).

Being able to openly share about their experiences and discover that they were not alone in their experiences had been comforting for them. “There's not much argument about whether or not it's valid. It's just talking about your experience”, they shared. For John Joe and Mx. Peacock, having a space where they could feel validated for being themselves was incredibly important in their lives. This was also true for all of the participants, whether it was family and/or friends, participants expressed the importance of feeling seen, validated and respected for who there were.

Theme Five: Navigating Contextual Factors

This superordinate theme organizes the participants’ experiences navigating additional contextual factors in their lives, such as the social, cultural, historical, and political factors influencing their lives and experiences. These included their experiences in school, navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, being a part of Generation Z, and navigating current political factors.

School

Many participants shared their experiences with school. These experiences ranged from school stress about homework, navigating school as a gifted and talented person,

and their experiences with being LGBTQ in the school system. Mason, John Joe, Mx. Peacock, Debbie Reynolds, and Pringles all talked about their stress with school. Debbie Reynolds, John Joe, and Pringles all reported struggling with grades as well. When sharing their experiences about being LGBTQ in school, the experiences varied widely. Some participants experienced bullying, physical assault, and invalidations. Some participants, such as Pringles and Mx. Peacock, shared that their school was “very, very gay”; Mx. Peacock even shared that the trash cans were painted in pride colors. Other participants reported having a relatively neutral experience. For Mason, they shared that LGBTQ things “are not talked about in general” in their school. Lastly, Mx. Peacock shared about their experience with other facets of their school: “mainly being really stuck up and white compared to the rest of the district.”

More than half of the participants described stressful experiences in school. For some, this included struggling with grades. For others, it was navigating “piles” of homework and the expectations that came with being gifted and talented. Three participants struggled with grades for various reasons. John Joe shared that he had failed two years of school and had been doing online school since. He was anxious and stressed about resuming in-person school again, while also experiencing some hope. “As much as I do have a lot of anxiety about it, and it's gonna be shitty for a little while, I'm gonna make it...considering, mental health levels are really great”, he professed. Debbie Reynolds shared that she was so stressed during her junior year of high school that she had a heart attack. She had been doing credit recovery, due to “depression and stuff.” Describing the heart attack experience, she shared:

I was in all AP classes, and I was at school from 7am to 10pm almost every day. My body just couldn't take it on top of the emotional turmoil going on. Um. So I wasn't feeling so great. And they call it a heart attack, but it was technically a heart seizure. I'm lucky that I survived it... So I stopped in my teacher's room at night. She said you 'look like shit', and I said 'I feel like shit.' And that's all I remember. Apparently, I told her I wanted to sit and then I face-planted onto the ground.

She ended up being out of school for two weeks right during finals. While most teachers had been supportive of her, one would not let her make up the final due to saying she was 'unreliable, didn't try, and a slacker'. "I went home and I cried", she said about the experience. Lastly, Pringles reported struggling with grades for the last five semesters straight. She shared this about how she coped: "if I don't put myself into this state of nonchalance, I will panic." Describing the experience, she stated: "my parents have seemed to have less faith in me recently, which is, I mean, kind of fair. I mean, I've my, my grades have been pretty slacking. And I failed a total of five semesters worth of classes, uh, so far." Speculating, it would appear John Joe struggled with school due to the divorce, Debbie Reynolds struggled due to family conflict, harassment at school and depression, and Pringles struggled due to ADHD, depression, and moving schools frequently.

Mason and Mx. Peacock both shared similar experiences with school stress, copious amounts of homework, and pressure from being a gifted and talented student. Mason shared that they were so stressed they developed an ulcer: "I was throwing up every day so I couldn't go to school." They equated this with being a gifted and talented

student and not pressure from their parents. This was evidenced by their following explanation of where their school stress originated: “self-worth problems, honestly, my parents weren't ever really like strict on grades, but I was always strict on myself.”

Additionally, this was what they shared about being a gifted and talented student: “I felt like I had to do good. I think that's part of it is they put such high expectations on you when you're a gifted student.” Mx. Peacock shared that their school “is known for everybody being stressed” because of the amounts of homework. Another gifted and talented student, they shared that they got stressed with tests and some majors at their school “are super intense.”

In terms of being gifted and talented, both Mx. Peacock and Mason shared their opinions as well. Mason stated: “gifted student, I just (sighs), feels weird. I don't know it feels weird to call myself a gifted student. I don't feel smarter than anybody else.” While Lynn did not directly share about being a gifted student, he felt weird talking about it, and therefore seems to have felt similarly to Mason. For Mason, being a gifted and talented student lead to a lot more school stress: “they're like, ‘Oh, since you're smarter, you can also do this pile of homework’. Mounds of homework like just.” They were also acutely aware of the increased mental health struggles due to being a gifted student: “yeah, it's ridiculous how many of my friends who either were or still are gifted and talented are like not doing well mentally.” Basically, they recognized that in order to “get in and stay in” with the gifted and talented student program, they had “to be like a perfectionist.” Mx. Peacock had similar experiences with perfectionism stemming from being gifted and talented. They stated:

gifted kids tend to like, not having much motivation because if you don't learn something right away you feel bad at it. I definitely experienced that. I do like being able to learn fast. I definitely have differences in concentration whether I'm interested in something or not.

Interestingly, most of the participants' experiences with school were stressful, and being a gifted and talented student was no exception.

Navigating Identities in School. All of the participants also shared their experiences with navigating being LGBTQ in their schools. The experiences ranged widely, from violence, to support and everything in-between. Mason and Henry have had fairly neutral experiences thus far. For Mason, their school was “not discriminatory, they don’t exactly talk about LGBT issues at all.” Mason’s teachers were supportive, but they were not out to some of their transphobic and homophobic classmates. Further elaborating on their school’s silence, Mason said: “but they don't talk anything. Like they don't talk about it. They're like neutral basically. Which is like fine. I'm in middle school. I mean, I'm not surprised they're not like teaching LGBT history. We haven't even gone through US history yet.” For Mason, although they wanted more focus on LGBTQ issues at school, they could understand why that was not the case. Henry also shared relatively neutral experiences at school. “I never like got bullied for it or anything”, they said about being genderfluid at school. They figured that this was due to not many people in the school “know[ing] who the hell I am.” Reflecting on their experiences, Henry shared how some people experienced terrible situations: “there's lots of instances of people being hurt. Like the rates of murder for black trans women is insanely high.” For them, they felt

like it was important to recognize the privilege they held in having had relatively benign experiences.

Mx. Peacock had a mix of neutral experiences and positive ones at their school. Similar to Henry, they also had not experienced bullying mostly due to being unknown in their school and not “socializing a lot with others” They said: “I’ve never really been bullied because I’m very good at kind of, just kind of hiding.” Since Mx. Peacock went to a high school that was “very, very gay”, they also experienced a lot of support. It was easy to change their name and pronouns at school, for instance. Like Henry, Mx. Peacock also compared their experience to others. They shared that they have heard “horror stories” from friends that go to less accepting schools, as well as other friends who are “gifted nerds.” While Mx. Peacock and Henry did not have personal experiences with discrimination at their schools, they were acutely aware of the oppression other transgender and gender expansive people faced in the world.

Pringles shared that she also went to an arts high school where the “LGBTQ community was very...prominent. “Results from a survey at the school shows that “80% of the school was Bisexual,” she declared. For Pringles, going to a school with such a vibrant LGBTQ community also helped her understand her own identities. As such, she learned a lot about different gender identities and sexual, affectional, and romantic orientations at her school.

Debbie Reynolds shared some mixed experiences. Debbie Reynolds explained that she felt very supported by her teachers and struggled with her peers. When it came to changing her name and her pronouns, it was very easy, just like Mx. Peacock’s experience. “No one can see your dead name. Nobody can see your, um, (pause) legal sex

either,” she shared about her school system. Although, she said, it was “really unfair for a lot of kids” since parental consent was needed for a name change. “I would have rioted and would have made my parents’ life hell”, exclaimed Debbie Reynolds, reflecting on what would have happened if her parents did not consent for her name change. “When it came to my teachers for the most part, I had a phenomenal support system”, Debbie Reynolds shared. Unfortunately, she had also been bullied for coming out, harassed, and falsely accused of sexual assault. While she did not believe being falsely accused of sexual assault was related to her identities as a bisexual trans woman, it was still difficult for her. Additionally, “I got made fun of when I came out, I got called queer in middle and elementary school. This is bullshit”, Debbie Reynolds declared about the experience.

Other participants had experienced bullying, harassment and violence in school as well. Valdin shared that he/they had been called the “‘T-word’ and been treated disrespectfully. After being called the “T-word,”, he/they: “went out and cried for like, about two hours and talked to people about it. Because I was like, nope. And the people I told, they’re all like, what the actual F.” Bullying at school was so bad that he/they went “back into the closet” multiple times when they were younger. He/they shared that bullying had continued into their current year in high school: “When I was bullied this year, actually, during 10th grade, and it sucked. And I was like, wow, people are this disrespectful? Like, that’s not okay.” Lynn also shared an instance of physical assault. “I got hit by some freshman guy, but with a lot of slurs thrown at me...I’m pretty sure that one was trans-related,” he said. He shared that his school stopped doing anything about safety within the LGBTQ community. Eventually, he switched schools to a more supportive environment. His new school had lots of trans students, which made things get

“a whole lot better” for him. These examples paint a picture of possible experiences that TGEY can have in school environments.

Additionally, John Joe shared about frustrating and invalidating experiences with being transgender in his school, including navigating situations with the school counselor. “Being trans and going to a public school sucks; it's also anxiety inducing,” he stated. He stated that his school counselor asked his mom what name to use and what bathroom to use for him. For John Joe, this experience was invalidating. About the experience, he said: “that was frustrating. That was uncomfortable. That was inappropriate. That was illegal.” He also was very frustrated that the school counselor only spoke to his mom instead of him, even about general questions. To highlight these experiences, he stated: “I don't even know what name is on my roster. Which is really A: frustrating, and B: anxiety inducing. And I hope she understands that I will not show up to school until it's correct.” John Joe’s experiences with being transgender at school also connected to his simultaneous experiences of youth oppression by his school counselor. The participants, overall, had varied experiences navigating being LGBTQ at school, ranging from acceptance and celebration to overt violence.

Lastly, Mx. Peacock shared that their “school has its own weird problems.” These problems were “mainly being really stuck up and white compared to the rest of the district.” In their understanding, they viewed this as a part of systemic oppression. For instance, they stated:

it's also part of the trouble is it's a really small school. And it's by auditions and like, bias and also like, naturally most arts are debilitating for people who don't

have as much materials besides maybe creative writing, but like visual arts, you need all the materials, film, stagecraft.

In spite of this, their school did try to work on racial disparity. Mx. Peacock was the only participant who discussed how race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status showed up in their school system, showing an astute awareness of their own privilege and circumstances.

COVID-19 Pandemic

Data collection occurred from August-November of 2020. For many participants, most of 2020 was framed by navigating the Coronavirus pandemic. For some, COVID-19 was a periphery thing. For some, it was devastating on their mental health. And for others, the slowing down of ‘normal’ life brought wellness and time for rest. This theme comprises of the participants’ specific thoughts about COVID-19 and the impact of COVID-19 on their lives. The main topics the participants discussed were that COVID-19 had impacted their friendships, changed their school environments, and, for some, impacted their gender transition. As noted above, there were vastly different and uniquely personal responses to the pandemic based on each participant’s situations; these are discussed as well.

For a lot of participants, COVID-19 had impacted their friendships. COVID-19 lead to increased isolation by way of decreased physical contact with friends, as well as decreased contact over texting. Mx. Peacock stated that it was hard to keep in touch with friends during the pandemic because: “like me, a lot of them have like, mental stuff,” they explained. Elaborating further, they shared that many of their friends had ADHD and would forget to respond. Debbie Reynolds reported that she was not able to have her

18th birthday party over the summer. For Lynn, he felt that he had more anxiety about friends, especially those at home with unsupportive families. Additionally, Zinniah shared that COVID-19: “has canceled so many things, which I am upset about some of the things that has canceled.” These experiences illuminate the impact COVID-19 had on the participants’ friendships.

Some participants, such as Pringles and Mason, reported barely seeing any other human throughout the pandemic. Mason stated that they had been quarantining the entire time and saw a friend twice. For Mason, video calls were not “the same energy” as being in person, which was difficult. Knowing they had to make a change, they were starting to make some plans to see friends. “COVID, isn't really getting that much better, but like, I can't stay inside forever,” they stated, recognizing the importance that seeing friends had on their mental health. Even still, they had to be very cautious. “I mean, the only reason I'm like hanging out with friends right now is because I know they've been quarantined this whole time, and also because otherwise I'm going to go crazy,” they shared. Pringles also struggled with the social isolation and felt video calls were not sufficient. “I don't think I've seen a human being other than family for months,” she shared. Like Mason, she stated that: “seeing my friends online can only do so much.” She shared how difficult it was to be isolated with her family as well: “love my family..., but I still very much crave social interaction...so being isolated with just my family is not a great thing,” she said. Throughout the nine months of the pandemic she had been through at the time of her interviews, she had only seen one friend. “I'm a pretty social person, but I can make do,” she explained. Overall, the pandemic fundamentally changed the ways in which the

participants were able to connect with their friends, which had varying impacts on their wellbeing.

Most participants shared about the impacts COVID-19 had on their schooling. For almost all participants, online school was the option offered, or they had to choose online for the entire year due to themselves and/or family members being higher risk. Many of the participants felt that online school was not the same; it was harder to pay attention, easier to get distracted, and not seeing their friends in school was really difficult.

John Joe stated that he did not get a choice from his school about the options. “Going to a hybrid year and not knowing what that was going to look like between online school and public school. That was weird,” he stated. Mx. Peacock, Zinniah, and Pringles all said that online school was harder for them. Mx. Peacock shared that they already struggled with regular school lectures and online school was “harder.” Additionally, they felt that online school was “harder with the social bits.” Zinniah expressed similar sentiments with homeschool feeling “stressful” and “hard to get into.” Pringles, who attended a music and arts school, was not able to be in the parts of school that she loved, like the band and orchestra. She shared: “you take away the band, or being able to perform the band. And they very much just take that away. And it's you've got a pretty normal school experience for me.” While she then got to learn about music theory, it was not the same. Additionally, Pringles conveyed that it was very hard for her to pay attention in online classes. She got distracted easily, she explained.

Lynn, due to his dad’s medical conditions, had to do online school for the entire year. He stated that while he liked doing school from home it “put a damper on” spending time at school with the Gay Straight Alliance Club and the Gifted and Talented

community. Mason also had to do the online school option due to their medical conditions. “I have to stay inside for all this. I’m doing online school,” they explained. For them, online school was “less stressful” than traditional school. However, like Lynn, the social components of school were also very important to them: “I’ll probably still want to do traditional next year just because I need that human connection, (laughs), like this year I can’t risk it like I said with everything going on,” they said. Mason and Lynn also did not have hope that schools would stay open for long. “I’m like, you’re gonna have to shut down there’s gonna be a fucking COVID outbreak,” Mason exclaimed. Additionally, Debbie Reynolds was going into college with it being remote, and Lynn figured he would be doing remote college next year as well. Like with many people in school during the pandemic, the participants had various parts of their school lives upended.

Lynn, Debbie Reynolds, and Pringles also talked about COVID-19 in relation to their gender transition. For Lynn, his “name change has slowed down, too,” as a result of the pandemic. Debbie Reynolds was not able to access her “lady doctor” to get her estrogen. “My levels flatlined during quarantine,” she stated. This caused her to go “through mini-menopausal episodes.” Lastly, Pringles said that she: “has not had much interaction with the people I’m not out with honestly, because it’s mostly just classes now. And I haven’t left my apartment complex to see anybody but family, in the entirety of quarantine.” For her, COVID has impacted her social transition.

Participants also shared their responses and reactions to the pandemic, which varied widely. For some, their lives did not look too different compared to their pre-pandemic lives. Lynn and Pringles both felt like not much had changed in their lives

since the start of the pandemic. “My life hasn’t changed a whole lot,” Lynn shared. As an introvert, his life did not look too different. Pringles felt that there was a lot that was the same in her life as well, although there were some changes. Her dad had been a rideshare driver and lost his job due to the pandemic. “My parents are quite antisocial. Um. So they didn't really go outside all that much anyway, we just go outside a little bit less now,” she said about how her life looks post-pandemic. Mostly, her life included the addition of wearing masks everywhere now: “we always just wear masks. I have to, you know, wear a mask when you go take out the trash. You get the mail. Everything.” Lastly, John Joe shared his surprise that they would even try to have school in person.

Some participants actually felt like the pandemic improved their lives. Zinniah and Debbie Reynolds both shared how the pandemic had impacted their lives positively. Zinniah stated: “[it] has given me the opportunity to try new things and honestly, nothing really feels different for me,” she/it explained. The previous year had been a particularly stressful year at school for Zinniah; for her/it the pandemic was a welcome break. She/it stated: “I actually am kind of thankful because...I just kind of needed a break from school.” Sharing more, she/it shared: “the pandemic is terrible, people are dying, but it's a great break from school drama. And I've been able to get my life together especially after what happened in 2019.” With the extra time away from school drama, Zinniah was able to focus on: “things that I like, instead of focusing on making other people happy.” Lastly, her/its room was an important space for Zinniah, and the pandemic had given her/it “the opportunity to like, clean my room.” In sum, Zinniah was grateful for the ways the pandemic had changed her/its life.

Similarly, Debbie Reynolds was also grateful for the pandemic. “This disease that's killed over 170,000 Americans saved my life,” she declared. She had been struggling with depression and suicidal ideation due to bullying and harassment before the pandemic started. Sharing her story, she said:

I spent time in the hospital right before quarantine. And I've been so glad quarantine happened because I was able to graduate. I wouldn't have graduated (laughs) if quarantine didn't happen. So because that gave me time to get my work done and be away from all the douchebags, all the bullshit.

Reflecting on her life post-pandemic, Debbie Reynolds truly felt that she would not “have made it” due to the harassment and bullying she was experiencing. It seemed, for Debbie Reynolds and Zinniah at least, that the pandemic greatly reduced the stressors in their lives.

For some participants, COVID-19 was much more stressful. Mx. Peacock struggled with not seeing their friends and the difficulties with school being online. “My parents have been joking. Like, we're each taking turns each day being a COVID-19 basket case,” they said. They felt bored and were trying to fill their time with volunteering, crafting, designing, writing, and cleaning. Unfortunately, the pandemic was especially difficult for Mason. The isolation due to COVID-19 led to increased depression, the development of an eating disorder, and a suicide attempt. Mason, who was high risk due to their asthma and lung damage, was especially isolated. “It’s terrifying,” they shared about COVID-19. They figured if they got COVID-19 they would “definitely need to be hospitalized”. Additionally they believed: “if I got COVID I would either probably need a lung transplant or surgery of some sort.” For them, the fear

was “overlooming.” The worst part of the pandemic was the isolation: “yeah, like so much free time just kind of like, causes you to go crazy. It's like, because humans are supposed to be busy like, we're not supposed to just not do anything for that long, honestly.” Overall, the pandemic was a welcome change from the stressors of daily life for some, and a terrifying and tragic stressor added into the lives of others.

Generation Z

This sub-theme explored the participants' narratives around their historical, cultural, and social locations as being a part of Generation Z. Participants explored social media, and growing up in a “post 9-11, post-Columbine” world. Lastly, a lot of participants focused on the differences between Generation Z and older generations. They primarily focused on Generation Z “being gay,” and that their generation was “way more accepting” than previous generations.

Two participants, John Joe and Zinniah talked about being Generation Z in terms of the internet and social media. John Joe shared:

It is hard living in a world of social media...the entire generation is encompassed in social media. And like, growing up around social media and like relying on social media. And as much as like, there's so many pros to it, having that reliance, and then also having that expectation from society kind of sucks, kind of is heavy, basically.

John Joe wished that he was less connected to the internet and social media. Even still, he shared the importance of online communities and wished people from older generations did not minimize the importance of online friendships by calling them “fake friendships.” Zinniah shared an opposite perspective to John Joe: “I kind of love Generation Z has

grew up with the internet through their entire life...the internet was invented way before me. And it's amazing, because basically, the internet has been taken over by Generation Z.” She/it was also proud to be a part of Generation Z and the memes that are created. Of this, she/it shared this example: “Generation Z is weird. I actually really like that I am part of Generation Z. So, I am part of all of the weird memes that go around.” While these two perspectives are contrary to one another, they both illuminate the unique experiences of Generation Z, who’s entire lives have been framed by the internet.

When discussing their experiences being Generation Z, many of the participants compared their experiences to previous generations. Primarily, participants shared that their generation was “a lot more open about things,” as said by Debbie Reynolds. Henry and Pringles both said that a “defining feature” of Generation Z was: “gay”. This was also echoed by Debbie Reynolds who said of Generation Z: “all of us are gay. Everybody's gay.”

In comparing to previous generations, Lynn and Mason, respectively, shared that previous generations “don’t know how to deal with more than two genders,” and “a lot of older people, they were taught that they/them can’t be singular.” These sentiments highlight how societal messages have shifted historically, from being less accepting to more accepting of gender diversity. Mx. Peacock shared some similar views about the rigid binaries previous generations navigated:

in a couple generations ago it was more like, either you were absolutely positive that you're gay. If you like, had a crush on this girl one time then you ignore it. Just marry or have 10 kids. We don't talk about this. It was very much that there was no shades of grey.

These quotes highlighted how much Generation Z had deconstructed the gender binary, dismantled cishetermnormativity, and expanded society's perceptions of gender and sexuality.

In addition to sharing about reduced homophobia and transphobia within Generation Z, Zinniah also shared about racism. She/it said: "we grew up in a better world than like, other generations have grew up in like, when there was signs that says 'colored restrooms' and 'white restrooms' and when being gay was very closeted and unaccepted." Zinniah also stated "we're more educated, we have newer beliefs." Continuing, she/it said: "we're the younger generation. So we have grew up around newer and better ideas, you know. And we have grew up around gay people...gay people are here. So we're used to that idea." Zinniah also shared about how she/it saw the world as safer compared to previous generations:

The LGBT community has been growing, and it still is, which is great. And Generation Z is good. Even the straight kids at my school still put pronouns in their bios. They ask people their pronouns, they are supportive, they are accepting of gay kids, cuz we're more around them. And it feels more safe now.

Zinniah's quotes highlight how oppression in society has evolved from previous generations to her/its generation. Overall, all of the participants echoed the sentiments that Generation Z was more accepting and allowed more people to be "out as (pause) whatever they are," as said by Henry.

Importantly, participants noted the distinction that there were not more gay people in Generation Z, but the world being more accepting has given people space to come out. This is highlighted by a quote from Henry: "I think is telling, not that like, 'oh, there's just

more gay kids'. I think it's telling that we are like, super accepting and awesome." These quotes counter some dominant narratives that there are "more gay people," when it is really the changing social and cultural contexts of a more accepting society that are allowing for more people to come out as queer and/or transgender and/or gender expansive. While John Joe was proud of this progress, he also reminded people to recognize that there was still much progress to be made towards acceptance: "and it is really cool how far we've come in the last 20 years. It's really frustrating [and invalidating] when that seems perceived as, it's all good now." While there has been much progress and acceptance in the world, there was still a lot of work to be done towards more inclusivity. In sum, while Generation Z was more inclusive and accepting than previous generations, many harmful dominant narratives remained to be dismantled and reconstructed.

Politics- "It's all spiraling out of control"

This sub-theme captures the sentiments expressed in the quote by Zinniah above. Many participants shared how they navigated a world with such unrest. 2020 was fraught with various political tensions, including the explosion of Black Lives Matters, the presidential election, and the ever-looming threat of climate change. The participants shared about their opinions and thoughts around current political issues with great passion.

In general, participants shared what it had been like to grow up in their historical social locations. Mx. Peacock stated that: "we're in a post Columbine, post 9-11 world," while simultaneously holding that it was "just what I've known." Zinniah's interpretation of what was going on in the world was: "it's just different waves of the Earth almost

ending.” Echoing this sentiment almost exactly, Henry shared: “if the world doesn’t end, I think we’re going to change the world”, in reference to being Generation Z. Zinniah further shared about all the different things going on at once: “everything came together in one year: 2020. The riots and the protests, and the pandemic, and global warming, and the election, [and wildfires], everything all in one year. It's amazing how crazy things are.” These sentiments were almost mirrored exactly by Henry who shared: “Gen Z is pretty cool, honestly, apart from like, the imminent threat of the world ending.” Henry said this as well: “so it's kind of scary, being like a teenager, and it's like, Yeah, it really does feel like the world is ending with everything happening. Like 2020.” These quotes highlight how normalized the chaos and stress had become within their lives, while also illuminating the underlying fears and anxieties participants had.

Due to experiencing this near-constant fear, Mx. Peacock and Mason emphasized that growing up in Generation Z made them a lot more mature. This was illustrated by this quote from Mason: “with all of the racial and political tension and all of the like injustice that's happening all around us of course we're going to be more mature than you might have been.” “It’s kind of insane,” Mason said, reflecting on “how much mature shit” they have had to consume. In spite of all of this, Mx. Peacock shared that even though the world sent messages of hopelessness, they were still able to hold onto hope. “I think that there is hope, but they're drowning it out with all the news of the bad stuff,” they said. Finding hope was important for participants.

Some participants also shared how they took care of themselves amidst all of the stress of keeping up with the news and verifying news sources. For Mx. Peacock, Mason and Pringles, they all limited their news exposure to protect their mental health. This was

exemplified by Mason's quote: "I mean, it's frustrating, but I try not to focus on it too much. I just don't even watch the news anymore. I get all my news from like, friends and social media." Acknowledging that it could be "hard to keep up with and maintain a good mental state," Pringles shared that she started avoiding direct news sources. Like Mason, Pringles got her news from social media and friends. Mx. Pringles also separated themselves from the harmful messages. They said: "[I] try not to think about the negative messages too much," and "[I'm] going to live my life." These quotes from participants simultaneously illustrated the importance of balancing mental health with being educated about world affairs, with the notion that Generation Z had also become desensitized in some ways. Although the participants tried to protect their mental health, they also shared the importance of verifying news sources, highlighting how dedicated Generation Z was in terms of being educated.

All participants also shared a disdain for the current political climate and Trump presidency due to the threats to the rights and safety of transgender and/or gender expansive people. In terms of President Trump rolling back protections for people who were transgender, Mason said: "dude, when he started like rolling back protections in the medical field for trans people it was like so frustrating." Further sharing their reaction, they said: "oh, yeah. I mean, I'm not exactly shocked. It's just I mean it. He's literally trying to push everything back. To how it you know, was." This quote shows the frustration Mason felt about possibly going "back" to a time with less inclusivity and acceptance.

Additionally, many participants shared in the stress about the upcoming election, while venting their feelings about not being able to vote for their own futures. Poignant

examples of these sentiments can be extracted from Debbie Reynold's experiences.

Debbie Reynolds shared her painful journey from working on the Clinton campaign in 2016, to Warren's campaign in 2020, to her resolute support of Biden for president. She shared how she felt in disbelief that Trump became the president in 2016 because she and the Clinton Campaign thought: "there's no way how anybody's gonna vote for him after talking about grabbing women like that. We were wrong. My mom was one of the people who voted for him, because she didn't like Hillary. That just shows all the sexism that people go through." Her last sentence illuminates how she made sense of what happened: that it was rooted in sexism. Losing to Trump in 2016 "devastated me", she said, adding: "I was up till three in the morning...cried my eyes out." Recently, though, she said that she had a "bit of a breakup with Hillary," since she made a hurtful comment about people who were transgender. About this incident, Debbie Reynolds shared:

what she said was, and it wasn't out of a place of hate, it was a place of ignorance. She said trans women do pose a legitimate threat to cisgender women and their rights. And I said, uh, you want to try that again? You want to try and rephrase, that and she doubled down. Months later, she said, 'I did not realize how much pain I caused, you know, this caused the LGBTQ community'.

Continuing with her thoughts about the 2020 election, Debbie Reynolds shared that she had proudly supported Elizabeth Warren, and was now supporting Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. Supporting political candidates who cared about LGBTQ rights was essential for Debbie Reynolds.

Debbie Reynolds shared about experiences of transphobia and sexism within politics as well. As someone who was heavily politically involved in her state, she found

herself not immune to transphobia. She shared an example of something another politician said to her: “I’m wearing a full woman’s pantsuit, like, clearly not a man. And she goes, ‘I know where I know you from, you’re [name]’s son. I remember you, I’ve known you since you were a little boy’. And all the people around us are like (pause) What?” She has also seen people sharing pre-transition photos of Briana Titone, a trans politician. These experiences were infuriating and disheartening for her.

Zinniah connected her/its annoyance about the current election, political climate and COVID. She/it said: “it’s not a coincidence that Republicans are also just not wearing masks...why are Trump supporters so stupid?...It’s just ridiculous, how they could not only just support an awful man, Donald Trump, but also not wear a mask during a global pandemic?” She/it also explained that she/it felt like: “I think just it is a package deal. When, if you’re a Republican, then you also don’t support LGBT rights. If you’re a Trump supporter, you also pretty much just support all lives matter.” Similarly to the other participants, Zinniah wanted: “Donald Trump out. He has just broken so many rules. And he has caused a lot of trouble.” Henry felt like the current election and political system was scary. This was evidenced by the quote: “I read a short informational article about what we should do as a people if the president attempts a coup, and I didn’t think, ‘ha! this is so stupid, this would never happen’. I was like, ‘this is important information that I better remember’, and that [is scary].” As such, Henry thought “Trump was an imbecile”, they “hated the two-party system”, and wanted the “electoral college dismantled.” Lastly, Pringles shared that while she did not know much about Ruth Bader Ginsberg, she was “absolutely distraught by her death.” These quotes by participants highlighted the

despair, frustration and confusion surrounding the Trump presidency and impending election.

Half of the participants also shared their thoughts about Black Lives Matters. Interestingly, all five of the white participants talked about Black Lives Matters. Any thoughts shared about Black Lives Matters from the biracial participants were included in the theme around race and ethnicity. Of the participants that shared about this topic, all supported Black Lives Matters. They also shared their disdain for the ‘all lives matters’ and ‘blue lives matters’ narratives, as well as a general wish for defunding of the police and erasing white supremacy. Mason shared this about the movement:

Yeah. It's so frustrating that people are like, still not understanding the Black Lives Matter movement. Like it's so frustrating to me that people just can't comprehend it for some reason, no matter how much we try and explain it. It's not like we think Black people are above every other race.

Mason also passionately declared: “it's like Black people shouldn't be killed for no reason. They're like, ‘blue lives matter’. Yeah, I can't, if I see one more ‘blue lives matters logo on, like a beat up Jeep...I’m gonna lose it.” Continuing, they humorously shared: “blue lives aren't a thing...unless you're advocating for Smurf rights. (laughs).” The other participants also felt just as passionately. Zinniah shared this about the movement: “that's the thing that we really need to focus on right now is defunding the police, and dismantling white supremacy, and changing systematic racism. So that way, we can all get along with each other and save the Earth at the same time.” Like Mason, Zinniah expressed great annoyance at the ‘all lives matters narrative’. She/it expressed:

they're like 'all lives matter'...It's so annoying. It's just like, Karens always feel like that they're being attacked when they hear Black Lives Matter. Just because somebody says Black Lives Matter doesn't mean that your life doesn't matter. And when you say all lives matter...all lives aren't treated like they all matter. It's just ignorant.

Zinniah and Mason's passion for Black Lives Matters, and frustration for people who were not understanding the movement, were evidenced by their sentiments. Henry and Zinniah both felt that it was "inspiring" that change was happening due to the movement. Additionally, Henry also felt strongly about dismantling the police system: "I personally, I'm all for gradually dismantling the police system and replacing it with something that works a little better, because (pause) it doesn't work very good right now." Debbie Reynolds also shared why she cared so much about racial justice. She stated: "I care a lot about racial and ethnic inequality because...the only discrimination I face is for being trans and female. But I haven't always dealt with those. My life was pretty cushioned before transitioning." As such, she had been attending as many protests as possible, wanting to use her white privilege for change. When asked during the last interview if she had anything else to share (about any topics), she passionately said: "Justice for Breonna Taylor!"

Zinniah and Henry discussed the scariness of climate change as well. Zinniah shared: "so the thing about the 21st century, is there's a lot going, on global warming." Further stating her/its opinion, Zinniah said: "I just get really annoyed by humans and I don't like how humans treat each other and, and how humans treat the environment." Henry described that climate change was "scary." Both Zinniah and Henry seemed to feel

the impending doom of climate change during their lifetimes, coupled with frustration at the situation. In sum, all of the white participants were very passionate about Black Lives Matters and fighting for racial equality.

Cisheteronormativity

Overall, this sub-theme focuses on how all nine participants navigated living within society's construction of gender, including gender roles, and the gender binary. This theme includes things participants heard from their family, people they knew, and society in general about traditional gender roles and expectations. Traditional in this context refers to the gender binary as constructed by cisheteronormative society, such as things like there are only two genders: man and woman. This sub-theme includes things participants have heard about what it means to be "feminine" or "masculine", general expectations, and limitations society placed on traditional gender categories. Participants shared how they made sense of themselves in the context of traditional gender roles, expectations and limitations. They also shared specific experiences they had navigating traditional gender roles. Lastly, participants explained their thoughts and opinions on the gender binary, gender roles, and cisheteronormativity.

Many participants shared messages they had heard about how men and women were "supposed" to carry themselves and use space, what was appropriate and inappropriate for their careers and interests, and messages around expressing emotions. Participants were able to share numerous examples about ways society had perpetuated the gender binary, and the rigid ways society defined what it meant to be a 'man' and a 'woman'. In the former, participants discussed rules for women hinging upon the color pink, playing with Barbies, and wearing skirts. Henry stated: "girls play with Barbie

dolls.” To further exemplify what they had heard, Henry elaborated: “like girls have to wear skirts and pink and purple and girl things.”

In contrast to gender roles for women, Henry shared this about gender roles for men: “guys have to wear like shirts with trucks on them. It’s much less for guys.” This last sentence highlights awareness of more stringent gender roles placed on women around their appearance and expression. For men, most of the messages participants heard were around taking up more space, either physically (“manspreading”) or intellectually (“mansplaining”), and not being able to express emotions other than anger. For instance, John Joe shared this about manspreading: “it’s traditional that men take up space and manspread...like physically, they’re just, they take up space and they’re louder and they’re like, they walk taller, and they walk straighter. And they, I don’t know, they’re just larger.” This concept of men and women holding their bodies different was also observed by Valdin, who said: “feminine is more like your shoulders down and like, you’re still sitting up, or you’re just like slouching.” They then shared: “I guess the masculine way to sit is with your chest up high with your shoulder’s up.” In terms of understanding toxic masculinity, both Valdin and John Joe connected that concept to men seeming like they are “above all else,” “think they know everything,” and are “not respectful.” In addition to Valdin’s quotes in the previous sentence, John Joe stated: “that can tie into toxic masculinity which is like the fact that you take up space, and you’re more important, and you’re top of the food chain, and you’re...royalty and stronger.” These quotes and experiences highlight the intricacies between how power, privilege and oppression has been woven into society’s construction of gender.

Mx. Peacock and Lynn shared about how they had heard numerous messages about the societal limitation on men's emotional expression. Mx. Peacock stated that there were limitations on men for "emotional stuff like showing weakness or liking a specific color...but most of the time, I think it's more just like, 'you can't feel that'." Lynn also echoed similar sentiments; he stated that he has heard gender roles for men as "the idea that guys can't really have emotions other than anger." Additionally, Lynn shared that he believed that there were "more suicides with guys than there are girls," because men: "don't know how to deal with their feelings. They don't know they can. They don't know they can talk to people." Lastly, Lynn shared that he believed men who were 'quiet, caring, nice, and non-angry' were not seen as valid by society since they do not fit into traditional gender roles.

In addition to hearing messages about how 'men' and 'women' were 'supposed' to carry and express themselves, participants also discussed various messages they had heard about what careers men and women are 'supposed' to do. These included resistance to women being in the STEM fields, not doing anything physical or things requiring strength, and an overall vibe that women have a lot more limitations on career than men. For example, Mx. Peacock stated that: "there's a lot of resistance for STEM stuff specifically with women, or women in higher positions." Henry shared similar sentiments about limitations on women not being able to have higher positions: "girls shouldn't run big companies. I saw this statistic a few years ago that there are more men named John, named John than all women running big companies. Yeah. Which is bad." Mason had also heard similar messages. They heard: "if you're a girl, you couldn't do that because you wouldn't be strong enough or something." They also heard messages mostly around

“like girls can’t do anything that requires physical labor or being smart.” These societal messages highlight limitations and restrictions placed on women around what careers and interests were societally ‘acceptable’.

In terms of gender roles for men, participants had heard messages around them not doing ‘girly’ careers, such as childcare, gymnastics, dance, and/or ballet. Henry stated: “a guy wouldn’t think that he could be like a ballet dancer.” Mx. Peacock heard that men “can’t do gymnastics,” and Mason also heard that “guys weren’t supposed to do dance because that was girly.” Additionally, Mx. Peacock felt that men have a lot more limitations on their personal life, such as being made to seem “not capable of doing childcare.” As such, these participants seemed astutely aware of the punishment of femininity within men.

As a part of how the participants understood society’s construction of these topics, the participants shared their personal thoughts and opinions about how society has constructed gender, gender roles, gender expectations, and the gender binary. When asked to share their thoughts about the gender binary and gender roles, Mason and Lynn both shared how “silly” and odd it was that society was gendering everything. Lynn stated: “there’s this almost segregation...we gender everything,” from baby clothes to gendered pudding. Mason also shared that they had seen gendered pens, Q-tips, and earplugs. “It’s like, why would you? Why do you need a specifically gendered Q-Tip?” they pondered. When asked why they thought this was happening, they simultaneously stated that “it’s honestly just about marketing,” and that they “don’t understand gendered objects or products.” Lastly, in Lynn’s opinion, gendered products have gotten worse within the last 50 years.

Mason and Zinniah both shared a lot of their opinions about what they thought of the gender binary and cisheteronormative society in general. Mason, expressing disdain and exasperation, shared that they: “just wish I could like abolish gender roles at this point, even though that's not like, realistic right now.” Elaborating on their point, they stated: “I mean, I just wish like, we didn't raise people to think that they can't do things just because of their gender.” As they unlearned gender roles and expectations for themselves, they stated they: “just don't even view myself in relation to gender at all, or really anybody else either.” For them:

gender in my mind has just been like obliterated as a thing I don't even like, register people as a gender. I like, I don't even assume people's genders at all, like even automatically anymore. Which is weird for other people...unless I know someone's pronouns, I always just use they/them automatically at this point.

Because gender is just such a like, (pause) distant concept.

This quote highlights Mason's desire for a society where people could be free to be themselves without the confines of traditional gender roles.

Zinniah was equally as upset about rigid gender roles being entrenched within cisheteronormative society. “I hate the fact that genders are split into two categories,” she/it said. Expressing confusion, she/it shared: “why do like only trucks and like construction and like math and science and like things like that have to be associated on the boys side?” Additionally, she/it believed that the gender binary was:

really misogynistic if you think about it. Because really women and like girls are all like ‘Pretty in Pink’, and makeup, and dresses, and that's like for them to look pretty for men...a lot of really sexist men believe that women were made to

pleasure them, but at the same time sexism, racism and homophobia are used by the same people...homophobes get disgusted when two women make-out but according to sexism they should think that's hot.

Elaborating further on the point she/it stated above, Zinniah shared that the gender binary was: "misogynistic because a lot of boys' toys are science things and girls' toys are like art and make-up...shows that society doesn't really allow women to have really advanced jobs like science and math." For Zinniah, she/it saw how the gender binary, gender roles, and cisheteronormativity were intertwined with, and rooted within additional forms of oppression like sexism and racism.

Zinniah also shared additional thoughts about cisheteronormativity.

"Heteronormativity sucks," she/it stated. Elaborating further, she/it stated: "in a heteronormative and cisnormative society you're born into a biological sex which means you're also born into a gender and also a sexuality; it's so dumb that your whole life is planned out for you based on your sex." Expressing her/its boredom with traditional narratives, she/it continued: "the heteronormative straight, white privileged male just annoys me, that character annoys me." She/it also believed in: "normalizing they/them pronouns," allowing people to express their genders outside of rigid "categories," and that people should be able to choose whatever interests or careers they liked, regardless of what society said.

John Joe talked broadly about the "segregation" that happens in society, where transgender people are segregated by having separate spaces. He shared that he "would like less segregation based on identity," and that all spaces were accepting and safe, not just "queer, the LGBTQ, the trans-specific." John Joe wished for a world where trans

people could be fully integrated and *all* spaces were inclusive. Additionally, he wished for “hearing trans voices in large media, and seeing trans bodies in media.” John Joe dreamed of a world where people who were transgender were as accepted and integrated into society, including mainstream media, as were people who were cisgender.

Mason and Henry both touched on homophobia and transphobia based on one’s culture. They both shared about how non-Western cultures were “more accepting” of the fact that there are “more than two genders.” For them, they could look to how other cultures treated transgender and gender expansive people and understand how differently their own culture treated them. Mason stated: “I mean, like natives, most of Asia, basically, most of the world except for Europe had an idea of more than just two genders.” Continuing, they also said: “in so many other cultures, like non-binary people. We’re just like, fairly common and just respected as people.” Relatedly, Henry stated that other cultures are “generally...more accepting,” and that our culture does not “treat trans people super great.” These participants were able to capture the complexities of homophobia and transphobia being culturally, historically, politically, and socially constructed concepts. In sum, the participants talked about how they were confused, annoyed, and frustrated by the confines of traditional gender roles and expectations as rooted within our cisheteronormative society.

Theme Six: Making Sense of Experiences and Resiliency

In this sixth and final superordinate theme, participant narratives around how they made sense of their experiences and their resiliency factors are shared. All but one participant engaged in various forms of creativity for self-expression, coping, and making sense of experiences in the world. Participants’ also shared the ways in which they want

to be seen as “human” and “whole people”. Additionally, many participants’ shared how they pushed back against dehumanization in society, including ways they engaged in politics, advocacy, and education.

Creativity

For many of the participants, creativity was a huge part of their lives. This included music, art, writing, crafts, hobbies, and performing/acting. All of the participants, except for Lynn, shared about creativity being important parts of their lives. Debbie Reynolds, Valdin, and Pringles all identified as musicians; Mx. Peacock also shared being involved in music. As for arts, crafts, and writing, Mason, Henry, Mx. Peacock, John Joe, Valdin, and Zinniah all self-identified as these being important parts of their lives. Mason also shared about their love for alternative fashion and how they created clothing to express themselves and their beliefs. Lastly, a few participants shared the importance that performing and acting had in their lives. These were Henry and Valdin. Some participants also engaged in multiple creative mediums, such as Mx. Peacock who sang, played guitar, wrote and drew.

Many participants identified as musicians. Debbie Reynolds declared: “I am a musician” when asked about her identities. She shared that she played classical piano, jazz piano, theatre organ, and the accordion. She was also into German music and yodeling. She just put out an album this past summer, where she sang about her life, dating, and being transgender. About the experience, she stated:

I did it all myself all the instruments and voicing and everything. I wrote all the songs except for one, only one of them's a cover...What's different about it is it's

all 50's themed. So it's all do-ops style music. Except I talk about the modern issues of being trans and dating, and being a young trans person.

She also shared about her experience being a transgender woman and a musician: “after I'd started transitioning, I always wanted to sing higher, and now it's like, I have a big range, and I might as well take advantage of it. So I can sing soprano one and I can sing bass two. So I just stick with that. So I do both. (laughs).” For Debbie Reynolds, she was proud of her music and her musical talents. She had even performed in Carnegie Hall.

Valdin, another musician, shared that he/they played the baritone Ukulele. Similar to Debbie Reynolds, Valdin also wrote songs about his/their life to make sense of his/their experiences. He/they shared: “the music I write is mostly about my addiction, like my struggles through life.” His/their music, he/they said, was “actually is really depressing most of the time with a lift up at the end.” This uplift to his/their songs helped him/them: “train my brain to remember that it gets better.” Writing music about his/their life helped him/them to increase awareness and work through his/their struggles. For Valdin, music and performing had also been a large part of his/their life and growing up: “I've been doing it since I was a tiny kid. Because my dad is a musician and a performer. So like, I grew up in this area.” Music had been integral to his/their life, experiences, and how he/they made meaning out of those experiences.

Pringles also identified as a musician and went to an arts school for her music. “I love it. Um, I mean, I pretty much only joined it specifically for the, the band, the concert band,” she shared about her school. She played the tuba, trombone, flute, clarinet, keyboard, and the trumpet. “I refer to them as my children sometimes,” she said about her instruments. Her music journey was also intertwined with her disability: Poland

Syndrome. She shared how she had to find which musical instruments she could play due to the ways her hand was constructed. She also explained that she had surgery on her hand to play more instruments. About this, Pringle's stated: "we had some webbing, webbing cut so I could play woodwinds better." Music had also been a part of Pringle's life for many years, like Valdin and Debbie Reynolds. She said she had been playing: "real instruments for five years. Um, but I mean, I played recorder in third through fifth grade." Music was so important to her that she went to a music school.

Lastly, while not a musician by identity, Mx. Peacock also shared that they sang and played guitar. They "started playing guitar in second grade." Mx. Peacock also had a vocal teacher. Overall, these participants shared how meaningful art had been in their lives, as a way to express themselves, cope with challenges in life, and to find meaning.

Some participants shared the ways they engaged in arts, crafts and writing for creative expression. Mason, Henry, and Valdin all identified as artists. They shared their favorite styles and what they liked to draw. "I'm an artist," Mason said about themselves, almost immediately during the first interview. For Mason, being an artist was "a big part of me just because it's how I express myself all the time." They liked drawing with "pencils, markers, [and] colored pencils." Additionally, they were learning more about digital art and how to express themselves through that medium. Henry, also an artist, stated that "being an artist is important to me." Art had been a part of their life for a long time. To highlight this, they stated: "I've been drawing since I was a little kid, I started taking it seriously in middle school." For Henry, they liked painting and "kind of stylized, cartoonish" art. Similarly to Mason, they were very proud of their art. "[I] have a binder, I painted a little Bluebird on the cover. And it's my favorite because it's the best thing I've

ever painted,” they said. Lastly, Valdin, another artist, used art as one of his/their “bigger coping skills.” This was how he/they described his/their style: “I started doing a style with like, exaggerated mouths...and then the eyes are exaggerated, and the hair is definitely exaggerated, and sometimes they're multi armed. My favorite art, art piece that I've done right now is multi-armed. So I'm like, heck yeah.” They also stated that they tended to: “I just draw people or my characters that I make up randomly.” For Henry, Valdin, and Mason, art was important for coping skills and creative expression.

Mx. Peacock and Henry also identified as writers. Mx Peacock stated that they: “can draw and I can write and, um I'm more of the talented side of GT.” Usually, they wrote short stories and poems. Typically, they wrote fantasy or sci-fi. They also shared that they “try to make my stories more queer-friendly.” Henry, also a writer, wrote a children’s book focused on “fitting in and how that’s not necessarily a good thing.”

Describing their book, Henry stated:

it was about this little girl named Minnie...she was different. And basically, over the course of the story, she gets pressured into like wearing, like, all of the stuff that other kids wear, and she's not happy. And then at the end, she's like, I don't want to look like everyone else. I want to look just like me.

Henry also described their inspiration for their book: “I think it's important for kids to know that like, they don't have to do what everyone says they have to. I wrote it for my little cousin.” This messaging proves powerful. Both Mx. Peacock and Henry used their writing to share important messages about acceptance and authenticity with the world, sometimes explicitly queer, and sometimes with queer undercurrents.

Lastly, John Joe and Zinniah also engaged in woodworking and raising plants. John Joe had been learning how to use a saw to make wooden children toys. Zinniah shared the following about her plants: “I’ve also gotten into succulents...I just kind of realized how fascinating they’re to me. So I started collecting a whole ton of them, and started planting them in pots. And now I have 120.” Zinniah also shared that she liked “knitting and arts and crafts stuff.” Zinniah and John Joe named that these hobbies were connected to their LGBTQ identities and sense of belonging.

Mason stated that they also “really enjoy alternative fashion.” They liked making clothing to express themselves and to “feel comfortable in my own skin.” They said their “favorite item of clothing I made was my patch jacket.” It was a “black jean jacket” with various patches on it that said things like: “down with fascism”, “Black Lives Matter”, “Eat the rich”, and “fuck racism.” “I put studs in the shoulders as well”, they stated. This clothing was another illustration of how Mason made sense of his experiences.

Henry and Valdin shared that being performers/actors were important identities. Both had been in musicals/plays. Henry stated that their favorite musical was *Anastasia*. They also said this about their experience being in plays: “I’ve been in a lot of musicals, a couple of plays. I was a Russian ballet teacher once. Nowadays, I do more of like the lighting and stuff. But I still love being in theatre.” Valdin stated that acting was something they were “heavily passionate about.” For Valdin, acting was about emotional expression, safety and vulnerability. Acting “gives me a place to feel safe, even though I’m vulnerable,” he/they shared. He/they said that he/they had gotten to do a play recently in residential treatment as well. “I had so much fun being an actor, like I’m an actor at heart,” he/they said about the experience. Unfortunately, he/they had “gotten too into

character”, which had them feeling like their “old self.” He/they described this as being “really bad” and having him/them feel like “a mess.” For Valdin, acting was a way he/they could make sense of their emotions and past experiences. In sum, nearly all of the participants were very connected to creativity and self-expression through music, art, writing, crafts, and theatre.

Fighting Against Dehumanization

During the research interviews, the researcher asked the participants “what do you wish the world knew about being trans and your additional intersecting identities?” Two main themes emerged in response: “I’m just human” and “I am a whole person.” These quotes indicate the participants’ push against dehumanization. For many of the participants, they wanted to be seen, heard and respected for who they were. Henry wished that people would “stop murdering us.” Lynn shared that “we’re people too. We’re equal.” He also stated that “we’re not inferior in some way.” John Joe shared that “The fact that I’m just human is like, I feel like it’s so wildly looked over.” The following quote truly illuminated John Joe’s experiences with feeling dehumanized by the multiple forms of oppression he had experienced:

I feel like that's a large thing and like, should be obvious, for your race, or your skin color, or your sexuality, or your marital status or your age, or your anything. If you're not like this perfect American white cishet man that's 25 and has two kids and a wife and works in this \$150,000 a year thing, and has this job and has a house and has, I don't know just investments, and just like this perfect cookie cutter of a human, then you're less than a human or you have these...double standards... it's like each box that you don't click is like, male, cis, het, white,

married, middle-aged. Then you, you get like a double-standard for each of those. And I wish it was just a little more clear. I'm just human, and I'm just trying my best.

Powerfully, this quite poignantly highlighted the dominant political, cultural, social, and historical messages surrounding John Joe's experiences of the world. Within that quote, the multiple forms of oppression he had experienced were at the forefront. The take home message was that the less he fit into mainstream dominant discourse, the more dehumanized he felt by society. Additionally, the researcher felt it important to share this exchange to further highlight John Joe's experiences with dehumanization:

Ellie: Just so you know I see you as a human in all of the ways.

John Joe: What an interesting perspective I didn't know people did that. I got all these things against this like ideal American. How could you see me as human? ...On top of fact that I'm a minor, I'm also in a lot of minority communities.

These quotes and experiences showed the pervasiveness of how dehumanizing the current cisheterormative, dominant society made John Joe feel, who was not a part of those dominant narratives.

Many of the participants also shared the sentiment that they did not want to be defined by any single identity alone. For Mx. Peacock, they declared that they would rather people focus on them as a whole person instead of their gender, which "isn't very unique or interesting." For Mason, they stated, in relation to their gender identity: "It's not the most important [thing about me]. Yeah, I would rather have people focus on like me as a person." Pringles shared that she tried: "not to make any of my hardships my personality." She felt that people assuming things about her could be "ridiculous."

Additionally, she stated: “all of my instruments are on full display at all times. Because I'd rather people see that about me than my other... things.” Additionally, Pringles tried to actively claim her uniqueness by actively going against stereotypes: “my friend group, they call me the straightest lesbian ever because I go against pretty much LGBT like stereotype. I don't like iced coffee. I prefer hot, you know, I'm a decent driver for only having about 20 hours.” Lastly, Zinniah shared that she was selective about who she came out to as Autistic, which was similar to her/its view about coming out as trans: “it just changes the way that people think of me,” she/it shared, further elaborating about how she/it did not want any one of her/its identities to singularly define her/it. All in all, these participants felt it was so important to be respected as human, celebrated for all of their identities, and not be dehumanized by being reduced to one identity or for not fitting into dominant discourse.

Activism and Education

Many of the participants discussed the importance of advocacy, activism and being involved politically in their lives. For some, their efforts were focused more locally, such as Lynn and Mason starting Gay Straight Alliance/Queer Straight Alliance clubs at their schools. For others, such as Debbie Reynolds, she joined city, state and national political campaigns that aligned with her beliefs. As such, this sub-theme shares the specific acts of advocacy/activism and politics the participants were involved in, why this work was meaningful to them, and how they navigated current political issues in their lives.

For many participants, advocacy, activism and political involvement were defined as cores to their being. For Lynn, he shared “I am an advocate; I am silent and I'm an

advocate.” Specific ways in which Lynn advocated included: starting a Gay Straight Alliance Club at his school, writing the code within his school for expanding gender categories beyond “male and female,” helping to expand definitions of gender at his bank, and participating in protests. An example of a protest he attended was: “I’ve gone to a women’s march at the beginning of the, uh, (pauses) Trump era.” He described the advocacy things he had done as being “cool” and “really neat”.

Mason engaged in advocacy in a few different ways. They talked about conversations in which they shared resources about gender expansiveness to help educate others. One act of advocacy they did was starting a Queer Straight Alliance at their school. Of that experience, they said: “if you’re going to a public school and they have like other clubs, they legally have to let you start a Queer-Straight Alliance. And so I started one.” This quote shows the resourcefulness of Mason, as well as their ability to be informed about their rights. They also actively worked to “destigmatize” mental health by talking about it. Another example of ways they had advocated in their life was: “I really liked Destroy Boys. But um, turned out they toured with a band called SWMRS, and the lead singer of that band is rapist, and they knew about it, so I don’t listen to their music anymore.” For Mason, they were focused on building community, aligning their life with their values, and destigmatizing topics that have been traditionally stigmatized in society.

For Mx. Peacock, advocacy meant advocating for others to use their name and pronouns. They stated: “I’m able to correct people [like family, and friends, and people I am out to] with like pronouns and stuff on a fairly regular basis, which is nice.”

Similarly, for John Joe, advocacy meant looking up Colorado bathroom laws and sharing them with his school so that he could use the bathroom that aligned with his gender.

Debbie Reynolds shared about her political journey starting at aged 13 with working on Hillary Clinton's campaign, up to present day with her active involvement in local and national politics. She had been involved in testifying to make it easier for legal name changes and gender markers in her state. When she was in eighth grade, she "realized I could make a change", which was how she was involved in Hilary's campaign. She had been doing fundraising for Briana Titone, who was the first transgender person elected to the Colorado Assembly. "She's my hero," Debbie Reynolds said of Briana Titone. "I'm a proud Democrat," she also declared, sharing how she would fight for everyone's rights, even those people that want to deny her own. Debbie Reynolds felt it important to be involved politically on a large scale.

Lastly, Henry shared about ways they engaged in advocacy. They talked about protesting at the capitol building: "I protest by the Capitol Building. I used to do that, like almost every week. And as much as I do that, like I don't know, if I'm actually doing anything." The last part of their quote touched on their sentiments that since they are a minor, they are unsure how much power they truly have for change. They were also passionate about advocating for people to avoid donating to the Salvation Army, Autism Speaks, and PETA due to their oppressive actions. Overall, many of the participants engaged in various acts of advocacy on the personal, community, and state levels.

Many participants shared narratives about their reasons and motivations for engaging in advocacy, activism and politics. Two main reasons emerged: fighting for change and a desire to learn and grow for one's self. These reasons highlighted their resiliency and passion. For some, they felt a deep-seeded passion for human rights. This was particularly evident in Debbie Reynolds, who shared that "politics is very important

to me...[because] I want equal rights.” She deeply felt that politics affected her, whether she was old enough to vote or not. “It affects me. And the fact that the current president is trying to take away my fundamental rights to exist. That's an issue,” she said. Tying into other participants’ experiences of youth oppression, Debbie Reynolds had also gotten pushback for her political prowess at such a young age. Her response to pushback she had gotten for being “too young” to care about politics was: “people say 'you can't vote for another six years. What the hell are you doing?' And it's like, okay, but everything that they're, that they're gonna vote for and put into the law affects all of us.” For Debbie Reynolds, she recognized how advocating for the future and all human rights was important.

For others, like Lynn, answering people’s questions (which were sometimes invasive and dysphoria-triggering), was a way for him to help change the world and potentially reach someone who was transgender and/or gender expansive and did not realize it yet. He said: “well, how are we gonna change the world if we don't know about the things going on? ...I like having a part in that.” Additionally, he explained: “I like helping others like that makes me feel really good. (pause) In general working to make the world a better place.” Mason also wanted to be able to do their part to change the world. For instance, they said: “I just feel like I should, just feels right to do it. Like I don't see why not? I have the time.” Mason also said the following around their advocacy with Black Lives Matter: “I'm glad I have this opportunity to like see this and be part of it at least, even if I'm, can't like make a big change at 13 yet. I still try and like sign as many petitions as possible and everything.” While Lynn and Mason were not quite sure the impact they could have on the world with their ages, they both tried their best to find

ways they could change the world and be a part of historical social movements, like Black Lives Matter. Henry, like Mason and Lynn, was motivated to do whatever they could. This was highlighted by the following quote: “I’m a teenager, and I don’t have money, but like, I try and like, get the word out about like, who to support and who not to support and like what we can do to help.” Valdin shared their motivations for advocacy as: “that’s what I’ve been trying to do on my journey, because I’m like, ‘Oh, cool. You don’t understand this. Let me teach you about it.’” Valdin also felt very “passionate about what I’m talking about” when sharing about topics that were important to he/them. For Valdin, he/they wanted to help spread education around gender identity and sexual orientation. Using advocacy and education, in whichever ways the participants had access to, was an important part of how they moved through the world.

Mason, Lynn, and Valdin, although enjoying advocacy to help change the world, also talked about advocacy as an “obligation,” which led to feelings of exhaustion. As an example, Mason said: “it’s really tiring to have to do it. And just like, I feel like I have to because otherwise nobody’s gonna... change.” Lynn shared similar sentiments as well when he said: “I am just willing to take whatever questions somebody has. I’m like, you know what I’ll educate. But, I know that’s dysphoria triggering for a lot of people, and it is kind of for me, but at the same time I’m educating people and that makes me happy.” Comparably to Mason and Lynn, Valdin shared about the pressure to educate others: “if I don’t educate them, they don’t have the chance to learn right now...it matters if they take that education or not”, they said, saying that it can be very “dysphoria-triggering” if they are not listened to. While these participants wanted to make the world better, these participants also recognized the emotional toll it took on them. They also felt like they

did not necessarily have a choice about advocacy and education if they wanted to live in a world where they could be safe and themselves. Simultaneous, advocacy was a source of resilience and stress for them.

In addition to wanting to change others, many participants shared about their own desires to learn and grow for themselves. Mason shared that they felt it was important to know what was going on in the world and to learn and grow. This was illustrated by the following quote: “[I’m] kind of happy in a way because I’m glad I’m educated on all of this and that I know my political beliefs for the most part, which is weird.” Debbie Reynolds and Zinniah both shared their journeys from having more conservative views to more progressive ones. Debbie Reynolds shared about her conservative childhood: “my dad was a self-described neo-nazi and hung out with a lot of really right-wing people. So I grew up seeing Hitler as a good person and singing songs about white people being the superior race.” She then shared her process of educating herself:

I unlearned that racism and educated myself, and in middle school, I started getting involved and learning more about policy and realizing what I actually stood for, and it was the complete opposite of what my parents stood for, which I thought was interesting to me.

Education, for Debbie Reynolds, helped her expand her beliefs and ignite her passion for advocacy.

Zinniah also described how she/it was glad she/it “finally educated myself about racism.” Similar to Debbie Reynolds, she/it had to unlearn conservative views. She shared this about her growth process: “my mom... told me about what's been going on, and she educated me about Black Lives Matter, which is great, because when I was just a

kid...I was actually on the ‘all lives matter’ side, just because I thought that it sounded like the better option.” Additionally, Zinniah explained how she/it has been learning about her/its white privilege:

I also educated myself about white privilege. I am, every day I'm checking my privilege. You know, like, just yesterday, I went to the store and wore a hoodie. And then I was thinking to myself, if a Black person were to wear this hoodie, they would have been followed around.

Zinniah continued to engage in educating herself/itself by following “Black feminist activists” on social media as well. Growing and learning about herself/itself in the context of current social, historical, political and cultural movements was an important motivating factor for Zinniah.

Lastly, For Henry, they shared a particular passion for wanting to learn about queer rights. They felt like it was really important to learn where they had come from and their queer ancestry. An example Henry gave about what they were learning about was: “I read this book called *Gay Berlin* and it explained how accepting, like especially Germany and Berlin and everywhere was before the Holocaust. And then years, years of gay history and acceptance and literature gone. This is why we can't have nice things.” Henry had been learning about the ebb and flow of queer acceptance throughout history, and how the world had “gotten worse in the treatment of trans people.” Overall, participants were highly motivated to educate themselves and others, and advocate for change. While some participants felt obligated to do so, all participants agreed that advocacy helped them create a better world, and fight for equal rights, while allowing

them to grow and expand as people. Advocacy and education also provided participants' a way to make sense of their experiences, further contributing to their resilience.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings to address the guiding research question for the study: how do transgender and/or gender expansive youth experience their gender identities, intersecting identities, and make meaning from these experiences? The results also address the purpose of this study which was: to share the experiences of transgender and/or gender expansive youth in their own words. Six superordinate themes emerged from the data: (1) Gender Identity Journey and Coming Out; (2) Identities and Experiences of Oppression; (3) Navigating Mental Health and Physical Health; (4) Interpersonal Relationships; (5) Navigating Contextual Factors; and (6) Making Sense of Experiences and Resiliency. Throughout the presentation of findings, rich, thick descriptions were used from each of the participants to share the nuances of the converging and diverging themes. All of the superordinate themes reflect the overarching convergent themes from all nine participants, with their divergent themes illuminated throughout. Within each superordinate theme, rich descriptions including numerous quotes and examples from each participant allowed for an immersive experience into the complexities of the lives of the participants. While some brief interpretations and contextualizations of the findings were provided throughout this chapter, a deeper dive into interpretations will be presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Chapter IV provided an in-depth exploration of how the participants experienced their gender identities, additional intersecting identities, and made meaning from their experiences. In this chapter, these findings will be discussed within the context of current literature and within the context of Counselor Education and Supervision. Next, implications of the findings, limitations of the study, and directions for future research will be presented. From this discussion, a deeper understanding and exploration into the participants' narratives will be explored.

The primary research question for this study was: how do transgender and gender expansive youth (TGEY) experience their gender identity? The two guiding sub-questions explored how TGEY experience their gender identity in relation to their additional intersecting identities, and how TGEY made meaning of their experiences, identities, and their experiences within their identities. As such, the primary purposes of this study were to understand the participants' experiences' in their own words, and how their experiences could be contextualized within current social, cultural, political, and historical factors.

Interpretations of Findings in Relation to Research Question

First, the results will be discussed in relation to the research question and sub-questions. The results will also be contextualized within the current literature.

Gender Identity Journey and Coming Out

The first category of themes that will be explored center around the participants' gender identity journey and their coming out processes. While dominant societal discourse in Western cultures upholds a rigid gender binary, gender is in fact a fluid, complex, and socially constructed concept (Carrera et al., 2012; Nagoshi & Burzuzy, 2010). Gender also exists within and outside of a continuum (Carrera et al., 2012; Nagoshi & Burzuzy, 2010). Ehrensaft (2017) stated that as children grow up, they engage in a process of constructing and reconstructing how they understand their gender identities, as well as how they express their genders. Additionally, gender identity develops through a multifaceted process including biological, cultural, and social factors, as well as the brain and mind (Ehrensaft, 2017). The participants' narratives and gender identity development fit within these more accurate representations of gender.

The very first part of their gender identity development process involved learning about non-cisgender identities. All of the participants described a moment in their lives where they realized that being transgender “was a thing”, either from friends, family or social media. In the next part of their process, participants reflected on their own genders. They engaged in a reflexive exploration to find the labels that captured these experiences. Some of that process included Googling different labels, like when Mx. Peacock was trying to find genderqueer words that encapsulated their gender identity. An example of this gender identity exploration process was shared by Valdin:

I started questioning my gender about in sixth-fifth- grade. And then I was like I think I might be more male than female. And then, as I started to grow up, I was

like, I'm not either, and I'm both at the same time (laughs). I played around with several labels, but like, ended up finding genderfluid to be the best one.

Participants explored ways they expressed their genders as well, such as through hair, pronouns, names, clothes, and binders. Research indicates authentic gender expression in TGEY is a protective factor against serious mental health concerns, such as suicidal ideation (The Trevor Project, 2020b). Some examples were Lynn exploring different pronouns, John Joe cutting his hair to be affirming, and Zinniah wearing dresses after she/it realized she/it was a girl. For some participants, as they grew up, they continued to explore and find the best descriptions for their gender identities. Also consistent with the literature (Factor & Rothblum, 2008), some of the gender expansive participants, like Henry, reflected on how they first learned about transgender identities within the gender binary, and later learned about gender expansive identities “existing” as well. This further allowed them to explore the complexity of their genders.

Another part of their gender identity exploration processes involved how the participants made sense of gender roles and expectations. While the participants recognized the dominant narratives around gender in their culture, they actively worked towards deconstructing and reconstructing these narratives. This process first involved them processing the ways gender roles had been “forced upon them”. For instance, Mason shared about wanting a Barbie doll, but felt unable to ask for one due to societal messages, even though their family was not entrenched in traditional gender roles. Debbie Reynolds shared how her father had physically hurt her to comply with gender roles or tried to force her to like ‘manly’ interests like hockey. As participants grew up, they then worked to recognize traditional gender roles, unlearn them, and push back.

Valdin shared how he/they had been able to channel both masculine and feminine energies to find a balance, while Zinniah recognized that liking woodworking, while traditionally masculine, just meant she/it was a “badass girl”.

Consistent with previous literature that states the very existence of transgender and gender expansive people challenges rigid gender binaries (Lefevor et al., 2009), the participants used complex ways to describe and express their genders. “I’m a paradox”, Mason said, highlighting how they challenged the concept of their ‘only being two genders’, just by existing. Another example was how Henry described their gender as a “little slider thing” between male and female, while recognizing that that was not really “how gender worked”. Additionally, Pringles, John Joe, and Zinniah described being transgender as more of a process, their sex, or how society sees them, while they see their gender identities as separate. This process of using numerous labels to describe their gender is also in alignment with a large study of LGBTQ youth, who used over 100 different terms to describe their gender identities (The Trevor Project, 2020b).

For their coming out stories, the youth experienced an assorted of responses. Many TGEY can experience family rejection, such as being made to feel bad about their identities; this can also include being mocked, taunted, ignored, abused or harassed (Grant et al., 2011; Grossman et al., 2005; Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2018; Smith et al., 2014). Most of the participants had relatively supportive reactions by families when coming out. Some experienced small rejections or misunderstandings, such as parents not really understanding their genders, not understanding they/them pronouns, asking if their child being transgender and/or gender expansive was their “fault”, and asking if it was a “phase”. Extended families proved more difficult, with some

participants' extended families ignoring their genders all-together and/or making other microaggressions. One of Debbie Reynolds' grandmothers left her at a restaurant after she came out to her, for example. Another instance was when Henry's grandfather sent them a letter saying they were "too beautiful to be a boy". Generally, however, most participants had at least one supportive immediate family member.

Even still, a lot of participants experienced fears and anxieties about coming out, even if they thought their parents would be supportive. Henry offered an explanation of having heard "horror stories" of TGEY who had thought their parents would be accepting, only to find out they were not. Debbie Reynolds had been so afraid of rejection from others by coming out, that she had seriously contemplated suicide. Both Pringles and Zinniah also navigated coming out selectively, by not wanting to feel rejected, or by worrying that they would then be dehumanized into a person only known for their gender identity. Based on these experiences, it would seem many participants' had internalized dominant messages around rejection from general society, even when their own families eschewed these notions.

Intersectionality of Identities and Oppression

The next collection of themes to be discussed center around what it was like for the participants to move through the world. This exploration will include navigating various forms of oppression for their numerous identities, as contextualized within current literature where appropriate. TGEY experience multiple forms of oppression at the same time, including being transgender and/or gender expansive and youth. Additionally, many participants also belonged to additional historically oppressed groups, such as historically oppressed racial and ethnic identities (Valdin, Pringles, and John

Joe), historically oppressed religious groups (Debbie Reynolds, Valdin, Henry, Zinniah, and Mason), and historically oppressed sexual orientations (Mx. Peacock, Mason, Zinniah, Debbie Reynolds, Valdin, Henry, and Pringles). Having multiple historically oppressed identities, such as race, ethnicity, class, and disability, can increase the rates of discrimination, harassment, and violence experienced (Gutierrez, 2004; Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2020a; Singh & Moss, 2016). While it is impossible to separate experiences based on one identity due to intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), some of the themes and following discussion will be presented in such a way to contextualize the results within the literature.

Gender

Since the existence of TGEY challenges the dominant cisheteronormative construction of genders, TGEY experience increased rates of oppression, including discrimination, harassment, and violence compared to their cisgender peers, and even cisgender peers with historically oppressed sexual orientations (Carmel & Erickson-Schroth, 2016; Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016). Experiences of harassment, discrimination, and violence seem even worse for gender expansive people, who truly defy the dominant narrative around gender binaries (Lefevor et al., 2009). As reported by The Trevor Project (2020b), 40 percent of TGEY had been physically harmed or threatened in their lifetime due to their gender identity; 60 percent of TGEY had experienced discrimination. Unfortunately, numerous participants shared stories of discrimination, harassment and even violence.

Several of the participants shared their experiences of being harassed, discriminated against, or assaulted. For instance, Debbie Reynolds described her

experiences being falsely accused of sexual assault. This caused her to lose many friends and suffer harassment and discrimination for years. While she did not think this was directly related to her gender identity, she did feel that no longer identifying as a “cisgender male” caused her to be an easier target. Lynn shared a story of being physically hit at school and called transphobic slurs. Valdin also experienced bullying and harassment at school, such as being called slurs; and had been sexually assaulted in the past. Zinniah discussed some bullying when she/it was younger after coming out. Mason shared fears of coming out in school due to not wanting to “deal with transphobes”. Debbie Reynolds and John Joe also experienced bathroom discrimination, which is common in about 61% of TGEY (The Trevor Project, 2020b).

These experiences are also consistent with current literature which says that TGEY experience rejection, bullying, harassment, physical and sexual violence, and general victimization from both teachers and peers at school (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 2009, 2019; Smith et al., 2014; Wyss, 2004). Discrimination, harassment and violence at school has been associated with greater substance misuse, unsafe sex, suicidality, and wanting to ‘go back into the closet’ (Smith et al., 2014; Wyss, 2004). While it is impossible to isolate experiences of the participants due to intersectionality of identities, a few participants experienced these outcomes. For example, Debbie Reynolds and Valdin both experienced suicidality and “sleeping around”. Valdin also went “back into the closet” as a result of bullying, and abused substances.

Sexual Orientation

Participants also explored how they navigated a heteronormative world as non-heteronormative. A lot of participants named that it was “cool to be gay now,” and that they knew a lot of people who were also LGBTQ. This most likely relates to the fact that society is getting more accepting of non-heteronormative identities (GLAAD, 2017). As such, this likely explains why there was much less energy in discussing their sexual, affectional, and romantic identities, since it was not that atypical for the participants. For those that explored their sexual, affectional, and/or romantic identities, they described a similar developmental process to that of their gender identities. This involved learning about different labels, applying them to themselves, and exploring through dating and conversations.

While the participants that talked about dating experienced relatively typical experiences such as ghosting, heartbreak, and failed relationships, they also experienced things unique to their intersecting gender identities and sexual, affectional, and/or romantic orientations. Debbie Reynolds shared about the intersections of being transgender and dating. She had experienced feeling like an ‘experiment’, where straight girls would want to date her, or straight men would want to date her, but only in secret. While Debbie Reynolds said she was the “perfect in-between” for these experiences, it was also painful for her. Additionally, she recognized that her views were unique, and that other transgender people could experience a lot of gender dysphoria in that situation. Pringles and Zinniah both shared harmful messages they had heard about their sexual orientations as well. This included erasure of asexual identities, and that bisexual people “cannot decide”. Mx. Peacock had heard these messages as well as Henry, who shared

about navigating being asexual and genderfluid, two identities that a lot of people do not see as “valid”. These messages, while a part of dominant discourse, have also been internalized by some within the LGBTQ community. “Oppression contests,” was how Mx. Peacock described the internalized homophobic and transphobic narratives within the LGBTQ community.

Race and Ethnicity

Three of the participants shared their experiences with navigating the world as biracial TGEY. According to Crenshaw’s (1989) intersectionality theory, these participants had numerous historically oppressed identities, exacerbating their experiences of oppression within the world. Historically, transgender people of color experience the worst impacts of oppression within the LGBTQ community, especially Black transgender women (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016). Additionally, one in three Black TGEY attempt suicide due to the societal oppression they face (The Trevor Project, 2020a). While the three participants who identified as BIPOC in this study were not Black, the research on intersectionality and experiences of BIPOC transgender and gender expansive people highlight the increased rates of discrimination, harassment and violence within this population. Some of the white participants also shared about their experiences of oppression within this context as well, with Lynn and Henry both specifically naming that oppression was “worse” for transgender people of color, especially women. Additionally, Mx. Peacock shared how the LGBTQ community has also internalized racism, providing the example that a lot of transgender and non-binary history had been “white-washed.”

The major themes the BIPOC participants discussed were around navigating being white-passing, how they navigated their race within the current political, social, and historical narratives, and how they navigated various forms of oppression, including internalized oppression. All three participants expressed numerous challenges with being white-passing. For Pringles and John Joe, they both struggled with whether or not they should identify with the BIPOC part of themselves. Valdin also expressed similar sentiments around feeling like he/they were not Chicano or white. These beliefs had been reinforced by society, with other people invalidating and/or minimizing their racial and ethnic identities. One example Pringles gave was the “Spanish test”, where peers would ask her to speak Spanish, and since she could not, people would invalidate her Mexican identity. The participants and their families were not immune to internalized racism as well. For Valdin, his/their dad did not identify with his Hispanic heritage, and Valdin only learned about his/their Chicano identity when he/they were 11. Another example was when John Joe discussed how his white mother was “racist” and kept John Joe from participating in indigenous cultural activities.

In the context of the current political, historical, social and cultural narratives, the three BIPOC participants shared their experiences. These centered around the current political rhetoric around the Hispanic communities within the United States, as well as the boarder policies at the time. Pringles and Valdin both reflected on the detainment camps at the border, calling keeping children in cages “dehumanizing”. They both wondered what would have happened to their families had their families immigrated to the United States under these policies. Pringles and John Joe also reflected on the Black Lives Matters movement. The movement was “exciting”, “frustrating”, and

“overwhelming” at the same time. Lastly, Valdin shared how he/they had been able to connect to his/their Chicano identity through making enchiladas with his/their dad and connecting to Chicano spiritual beliefs.

Religious and Spiritual Identities

Out of the participants that named and discussed their religious and/or spiritual identities, all but one participant identified with non-dominant religious identities. While Pringles identified as Christian, the rest of the participants identified as atheist, agnostic, Wiccan, Pagan, and/or any combination thereof. Similar to additional identity exploration journeys, a lot of the participants started out believing what their parents believed (or being “forced to”, as Henry described), while then growing and learning about their own beliefs and different labels that fit those experiences. As an example, Zinniah, who identified as non-religious and agnostic, was exploring various religions that might fit her/its beliefs, such as Buddhism, Pagan, and Confucianism. Three participants shared their experiences and thoughts around the intersections with being LGBTQ, religion and spirituality. Henry and Pringles both named that dominant Christian narratives around hate and oppression of LGBTQ people are not an inherent part of those religions. Pringles gave an example of how the Pope had recently come out as accepting LGBTQ people, which helped her reconcile her queerness with her religion. A more personal experience was shared by Debbie Reynolds, who had been “kicked out” of her church for being *perceived* as gay, before she had ever come out. That experience left her feeling “abandoned” by her “church family.” In sharing about their religious and spiritual beliefs, participants discussed wanting to feel connected to nature, having a sense of community, and agreeing with some of the tenets of those denominations. Lastly, Valdin shared an

experience of being discriminated against for having a non-dominant religion, Wiccan. In this experience, Valdin shared that society generally views Wiccans as practicing witchcraft, with fear surrounding this. Debbie Reynolds also felt the need to hide her Wiccan beliefs within the political realms of which she was a part.

One recent article reviewed ten studies over the last decade exploring religion and spirituality with LGBTQ youth, (McCann et al., 2020) which can provide some contexts for the aforementioned participants' experiences. These authors found that for some LGBTQ youth, religion can be a source of discrimination against their identities, such as with the practice of conversion therapy. For youth who have been a part of dominant religions, it has been shown that shame, internalized homophobia and transphobia, and poorer mental health outcomes. For others, religion and spirituality can be a place of community and a protective factor when the religion and spirituality is affirming of their identities. The results from McCann et al., (2020) echo the findings from participants: for some, religion had been a source of discrimination and shame, while for others, like Pringles, religion had been a source of community, healing and acceptance. Additionally, while some of the youth left behind more dominant and oppressive religions, they were able to find and connect to spiritualities that affirmed their identities and beliefs, which provided protective factors for their mental health.

Youth Oppression

While participants discussed their experiences navigating the world as a TGEY, an undercurrent of experiencing youth oppression and adultism emerged. Youth oppression is the system by which a binary of youth/adult has been socially constructed to reinforce systems of power and oppression by invalidating and silencing the

experiences of youth (Walkerdine, 1984). Some participants experienced youth oppression from adults they knew personally, such as being told that they were “too young” to know themselves, their identities are “just a phase”, or adults assuming that they did not have opinions or knowledge. Other participants, like Mx. Peacock, shared that they heard general societal messages reinforcing the belief that, for young people, their opinions “aren’t valid” and “don’t matter”. Many participants felt frustrated by these experiences of not “getting choices” or having a say in their own lives.

Mental Health and Physical Health

This next collection of themes will explore the participants’ mental health and physical health. These themes will be explored within the context of current literature, as well as how their mental health and physical health can be understood within the context of oppression.

Mental Health

The literature has primarily reached consensus that psychopathology is not inherent in TGEY (Durwood et al., 2017; Ehrensaft, 2013; Olson et al., 2016), but that mental health challenges are the result of navigating oppression. As such, all participants reported experiencing mental health concerns. While not all of the participants’ mental health concerns can be attributed to societal oppression, it is likely at least some of their mental health challenges resulted from societal oppression. The mental health concerns of the participants centered around depression, including suicidality, anxiety, gender dysphoria, PTSD and eating disorders. Many participants reported experiencing more than one mental health concern. Of the participants that talked about their mental health in-depth, quite a few had experienced suicidality in their lifetimes. This included Debbie

Reynolds, Mason, and Valdin. Mason had been in intensive outpatient treatment for a recent suicide attempt and an eating disorder. Valdin and Henry had also both been in residential treatment. Lastly, a large number of participants reported experiencing neurodivergence, including ADHD, Autism/Asperger's, and a Sensory Processing Disorder. These are just a few examples of the myriad of serious mental health concerns the participants discussed.

This is consistent with the literature which states that the impacts of oppression on TGEY increase rates of psychological distress, anxiety, depression, suicidality, self-harm, social exclusion, gender dysphoria, eating disorders, and feeling unsafe at school (Aitken et al., 2016; Clark et al., 2014; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007; Hatchel et al., 2019; Holt et al., 2016; Kelleher, 2009; Skagerberg et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2014; Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018). For example, recent literature has found that two thirds of TGEY have experienced depression within the last year (The Trevor Project, 2020b). Additionally, 48% of TGEY 13-17 years old, the ages of participants in this study, seriously considered suicide within the last year; and 21% of TGEY attempted suicide within the last year (The Trevor Project, 2020b). About three in four TGEY have also reported experiencing anxiety symptoms (The Trevor Project, 2020b).

Lastly, a couple of participants shared their experiences with mental health treatment. Mason had a relatively positive experience, having a counselor who was also LGBTQ. Valdin and Henry, who had experiences in residential treatment, had some different experiences. They both discussed navigating homophobia and transphobia in treatment. Although Valdin did not name this as a concern, he/they also shared about having to educate his/their therapist about transgender topics. Some of these topics

discussed, resonate within the context of current literature. According to a study done by The Trevor Project (2020b), LGBTQ youth reported numerous barriers to receiving mental health care. This included 46% of TGEY reporting concerns about the LGBTQ competence of mental health providers, 26% had fears of being outed, 26% had previous negative experiences, and 17% did not seek care due to a lack of providers who were LGBTQ (The Trevor Project, 2020b). This is frightening, considering the high mental health concerns in this population, and given that 46% of youth in that survey wanted mental health care, but did not access it (The Trevor Project, 2020b). In light of the participants' stories around their mental health and treatment, the lack of inclusive mental health services is of huge concern.

Physical Health and Oppression

Three participants briefly shared their experiences navigating the world with physical health concerns and/or disabilities. This included Pringles sharing about how she moved through the world with Poland Syndrome. This mostly impacted her music journey. Lynn and Mason were both born pre-mature. For Lynn, he was supposed to have been “wheelchair-bound”. He wanted to work as an occupational therapist someday, as a way to give back and help others similar to himself. Mason had lung damage and asthma due to being born premature. This caused Mason to feel like the “terrifying” threat of “COVID-19 was looming”, since they were likely to have been “hospitalized” if they were infected. As such, these three participants' physical health concerns were interwoven into their daily lives, interests, and how they navigated the world.

Interpersonal Relationships

The next collection of themes will discuss the participants' experiences in the world as contextualized by their relationships. Relevant literature will also be provided as they relate to these themes.

Additionally, in terms of their general family relationships, participants had various experiences. More than half of the participants came from families with divorce and/or family conflicts. These events in their lives undoubtedly contributed to who they were as people, although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly. John Joe, however, was able to conceptualize that his parents' divorce was influential in shaping who he was as a person, including his identity as transgender. Most of the participants also had various supportive family relationships. Mx. Peacock and Pringles were both raised as only children.

When coming out to, and navigating relationships with peers, there were more stories of rejection. Debbie Reynolds said that she had been "out for two years, and those two years have been hell". Valdin had experienced bullying to such an extent that he/they went "back into the closet". Many participants shared a resounding message of wanting to be respected for who they were, which included people recognizing that their genders were valid, and using their names and pronouns. This is an especially important point to consider, given that the bare minimum of acceptance described by participants was respect for them, their genders, name, and pronouns. As such, TGEY who are supported in their gender identities, such as by having their names and pronouns respected, as well as the ability to express their gender identities, have decreased rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation and attempts (Ehrensaft, 2013; The Trevor Project, 2020b; Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018). When supported in their identities, TGEY can improve their

mental health outcomes and reduce occurrences of substance misuse (Hatchel & Marx, 2018). One such example was a recent study done by The Trevor Project (2020b), which found that youth who had their pronouns respected by all or most of the people in their lives attempted suicide at half the rate of those who had no one in their lives using their pronouns.

While some participants experienced rejection by peers and friends, they also experienced a lot of acceptance. In terms of friends, TGEY who are connected to other transgender people can have reduced fear and suicidality, and more comfort (Testa et al., 2014). Almost all of the participants had LGBTQ friends, highlighting factors contributing to their resilience. A few participants, like Henry, Mx. Peacock, Pringles and Mason, felt safe coming out to their friends due to their shared identities as TGEY. Almost all of the participants had friends who were a part of the LGBTQ community, including friends who were transgender and gender expansive. Participants were able to receive support and offer support to their transgender and gender expansive friends. While John Joe had a relatively unsupportive family and did not mention having any LGBTQ friends, he had a supportive adult who had a very influential relationship in helping John Joe feel accepted. Lastly, possibly dispelling some myths that TGEY with friends who were also TGEY are “on trend” or being “influenced by one another, Mason, Zinniah and Henry shared their thoughts. These participants either intentionally chose LGBTQ friends for acceptance or felt that they naturally gravitated towards that group before anyone realized they were LGBTQ.

Contextual Factors

The next collection of themes centers around the participants' experiences navigating the general cultural, historical, political and social factors within their lives. These included their experiences with school, recent politics and social movements, navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, what it was like to be a part of Generation Z, and living in a cisheteronormative society.

School

All participants shared their experiences within school to various degrees. The experiences within schools varied widely for participants. For example, Pringles and Mx. Peacock described that their school was “very gay”; it was easy for Mx. Peacock to change their name at school and have teachers use their pronouns. Debbie Reynolds shared that the school system itself was relatively trans friendly. She explained that her school system did not deadname students. Although, she shared, students needed to get parental consent from the school in order to change their name, which was a challenge for students like one of her friends who could not come out to their parents. While Debbie Reynolds' experiences with teachers were supportive, she experienced years of bullying and harassment at school, such to the point of considering suicide as an option. Additionally, while Mason shared that some teachers were supportive of their pronouns, they also did not want to correct them or be out to everyone due to “transphobes” and “homophobes” within their classes. John Joe described an incredibly “frustrating” experience with a school counselor, where he experienced a combination of youth oppression and trans oppression within those interactions. Lynn shared of being physically hurt in one school, describing how administrators had “stopped caring” about

protecting transgender students. Once he moved schools to one with more transgender students, he felt a lot safer and included.

Since most transgender youth spend countless hours at school each week, an inclusive school is important to students' well-being. For instance, as cited previously, the more people that use a person's name and pronouns, the less likely they will be to attempt suicide (The Trevor Project, 2020b). When students experience discrimination, rejection, and lack of resources in school, such as some of the participants in this study, those experiences can then lead to increased mental health struggles such as depression, anxiety, self-harming behaviors, suicidal ideation, and a decreased sense of belonging in schools (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Hatchel et al., 2019; Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018). The experiences of the participants are consistent with the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network's annual school climate survey which found that LGBTQ youth continue to experience hostile school environments (GLSEN, 2019). These experiences of harassment, assault, homophobia, and transphobia lead to decreased functioning in school and worsened mental health concerns like increased depression and suicidality (GLSEN, 2019). As touched on previously, many of the participants experienced these increased mental health struggles due to the hostile school environments they faced.

Recent Politics and Social Movements

Additionally, several participants discussed the current political and historical culture. Quite a few participants discussed the presidential election, Black Lives Matters, and climate change. Some participants shared that the world was "scary", and how it felt like "different waves of the Earth almost ending." Participants were passionate about social change and advocacy, finding whichever ways they could use their own voices.

This was especially true for the Black Lives Matters movement, where some participants shared how they had been learning about their own white privilege. While a lot of participants appreciated being “educated” and having learned about so many things happening in the world, they also felt that it impacted their mental health. This is consistent with current literature, which found that 86% of LGBTQ youth reported that recent politics affected their well-being (The Trevor Project, 2020b).

COVID-19 Pandemic

Participants also discussed the impact COVID-19 had on their lives. For some, COVID-19 was a welcome relief from school stress and bullying, such as with Debbie Reynolds and Zinniah. While for others, like Mason, it was more devastating on their mental health. Some participants felt like their lives were not profoundly impacted by the pandemic. Across all participants, COVID-19 had impacted their schooling as well as their relationships to varying degrees.

Generation Z

When reflecting on what it was like to be Generation Z, most participants shared that a “defining feature” of their generation was “gay”. This sentiment was echoed by every participant, who highlighted that their generation was more “open”, “accepting”, and had grown up with “newer ideas.” Participants felt like their generation allowed more people to be “out as whatever they are,” due to increased acceptance for LGBTQ people, as well as decreased racism. This has also been captured within the literature. Recent literature reports an increase in the number of young adults, children and adolescents identifying as transgender and gender expansive than in any previous generation (Flores et al., 2016; GLAAD, 2017). As such, children and adolescents have the highest rate of

identifying as transgender and/or gender expansive in the population (Flores et al., 2016). This increase in identification as transgender and/or gender expansive has been attributed to the growing acceptance of transgender and gender expansive people within the United States (GLAAD, 2017). Clearly, Generation Z is growing up in a time of increased acceptance, awareness, and commitment to social change.

Living in a Cisheteronormative Society

Participants wove dominant cisheteronormative narratives throughout their stories. Historically, gender has been conflated with a person's sex assigned at birth and kept within a rigid gender binary of male/female (Carrera et al., 2012; Drescher, 2010). This binary traditionally carries with it heavy societal expectations in the forms of gender roles and expectations, rooted in cisheteronormativity. Most participants had heard various dominant messages around gender roles and expectations, such as 'appropriate' ways to express oneself and one's gender through clothes, personalities, emotions, interests and careers. Narratives centered around ways society polices gender in terms of limited emotional expression for men, the devaluation of femininity within men, and the increased traditional power and dominance of men. Participants felt there were more limitations for women around careers, including within the science, technology, engineering and math fields, as well as the need to wear more 'girly' types of clothes. Also aligned with the historically rigid gender binary, some participants noted how society was "gendering everything", including food items, pens, and Q-tips.

When reflecting on their current views of traditional gender, a lot of participants expressed disdain. Lynn and Mason stated that traditional societal constructions of gender were "silly". Mason further shared they wished gender roles could be "abolished" as a

thing, and that they had basically “obliterated” the traditional constructions of gender in their mind. Lastly, Zinniah’s process involved learning how historic constructions of gender were “misogynistic” and rooted in sexism. “Heteronormativity sucks”, she said.

Henry and Mason were also able to name the differences in cultural conceptualizations of gender, especially comparing and contrasting experiences within and outside of Western cultures. Both these participants shared how non-Western cultures were “more accepting” of the fact that there are more than “two genders”. Mason specifically named indigenous cultures, “most of Asia”, and “most of the world except for Europe had an idea for more than just two genders”. Henry’s and Mason’s understandings of how gender is culturally, historically, and socially constructed align with current literature. Historically, transgender and gender expansive identities have been a part of various cultures for thousands of years (Ehrensaft, 2017; Leland, 2009; Nanda, 1986).

Resiliency

As participants shared their experiences navigating the world with their various identities, a resounding desire to be seen as “whole people” and as “just human” emerged. These sentiments were a response against dominant oppressive discourse that attempted to dehumanize the participants (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2020a). While sharing about their experiences, many participants explicitly named not wanting to be seen as one identity, which collapsed their multifaceted identities into one overarching narrative. Pringles stated she did not want her “hardships to define” her; Zinniah shared that she/it did not want to be named as the “autistic girl” or the “trans girl”. Navigating multiple forms of oppression left many participants feeling like the world did not see

them as valid or as human. This was highlighted by the following quote by John Joe, who described navigating the world with multiple historically oppressed identities, and so badly sharing the desire to be seen as “just human”:

I feel like that's a large thing and like, should be obvious, for your race, or your skin color, or your sexuality, or your marital status or your age, or your anything. If you're not like this perfect American white cishet man that's 25 and has two kids and a wife and works in this \$150,000 a year thing, and has this job and has a house and has, I don't know just investments, and just like this perfect cookie cutter of a human, then you're less than a human or you have these...double standards... it's like each box that you don't click is like, male, cis, het, white, married, middle-aged. Then you, you get like a double-standard for each of those. And I wish it was just a little more clear. I'm just human, and I'm just trying my best.

This quote ties together many of the participants' experiences with oppression and wanting to be seen as so much more than their historically oppressed identities.

These wonderfully “whole people”, were so much more than any single identity, or combination thereof, as shared within this study. As an example, eight out of the nine participants shared their creative endeavors. The participants shared about their music, art, writing, crafts, fashion, and performances/acting with fervor. Many were musicians, like Debbie Reynolds, who had recently put out an album. Pringles and Mx. Peacock both went to a school for the arts. Some of the musicians, like Valdin and Debbie Reynolds, channeled their experiences within the world into their music as a form of self-expression. For others, like Henry, their writing was a way for them to share about the

importance of being authentically one's self, in the form of a children's book. Mx. Peacock and their friends took it upon themselves to write more queer literature. For Mason, fashion was a way of self-expression and making sense of political beliefs. Additionally, many participants named their creativity as coping skills.

The fight to be seen as “whole people”, permeated the interview process as well. While the participants discussed their historically oppressed identities, most of the interview conversations centered around their interests, navigating being in the world in general, their generation, their friends, and their families – typical things common to most youth. One participant, Mx. Peacock, stated they were explicitly answering any questions about their gender identity in the context of them being a “whole person.” Many of the participants also identified as advocates, fighting for change within their individual lives, communities, and country. Debbie Reynolds was heavily involved in politics, for example. Advocacy and educating others have been noted as a resiliency factor within the literature as well (Smith et al., 2014). While understanding the participants' experiences of oppression, power, and privilege is important to understanding their experiences, a holistic framework centering their entire person, identities, experiences, and interests, must never be forgotten.

Results and Recommendations in the Context of Counselor Education

This next section provides recommendations within the context of Counselor Education, grounded within the results and recent literature.

Recommendations for Training Future Counselors

The results provide a robust collection of participant narratives and themes which can easily be understood within the context of providing transaffirmative counseling approaches to TGEY. For instance, the current literature discusses the importance of using clients' own language when providing counseling (Benson, 2013; Bockting et al., 2006; Collazo et al., 2013; Ehrensaft, 2017; Singh et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2014). While participants were not discussing their experiences within counseling directly, many participants named the importance of people respecting their names and pronouns as central to them feeling respected and validated as humans. As such, counselors have further evidence for the importance of respecting the "basic human rights" of their TGEY clients.

Additionally, a transaffirmative approach to counseling includes having the knowledge and awareness of the psychosocial concerns, gender milestones, and the context of TGEY within dominant discourse (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). The results, while not representative of all experiences of TGEY, provide numerous narratives for understanding the complex and nuanced lives of TGEY in today's society. It is important to recognize that pathology is not located *within* a person who is transgender and gender expansive, but as a result of experiencing multiple forms of oppression (Edwards-Leeper et al., 2016; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; World Professional Association for Transgender Health, 2012). Clear narratives and themes from the participants focused on their experiences navigating oppression in their lives and how this had a direct impact on mental health, as detailed in the previous section. It is especially imperative for counselor educators, and subsequently counselors, supervisors, and counselors-in-training, to be

aware of the effects oppression have on the mental health of TGEY, while not solely focusing on this experience of their lives. As such, counselor educators need to be aware of the various components of the lives of TGEY youth, relating to their gender and additional identities and experiences.

Since one feature of a transnegative approach to counseling is the need for transgender and gender expansive clients to educate their counselors (Bockting et al., 2004), counselor educators, counselors, supervisors, and counselors-in-training can use the results from this study as a way to begin to educate themselves on the experiences of TGEY. Another component of transnegative approaches to counseling involves telling clients that their gender identities are not ‘real’ and invalidating their genders (McCullough et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2014). As many of the gender expansive participants highlighted their experiences of invalidation around their genders “not existing”, it is important for counselor educators to convey to their trainees the importance of accepting and validating all gender identities. If counselor educators, counselors, counselors-in-training, and supervisors are not aware of different gender identities and experiences, it is their responsibility to educate themselves, not the clients’. This was made clear when some participants shared that they simultaneously want to spread education to change the world, while feeling “obligated”, “exhausted”, and “dysphoric” while doing so. Counselor educators, counselors, counselors-in-training, and supervisors need to continue to do the work to educate themselves, so their clients, supervisees, and trainees do not have to, especially if they are looking to those with historically oppressed genders to do the educating.

Counselor educators can use the information from this study to help train future counselors and supervisors in being more transaffirmative in their approaches. Since knowledge is one of the three cornerstones of striving for multicultural and social justice counseling (Ratts et al., 2016), as well as with transaffirmative counseling approaches, using the information gleaned from the participants will undoubtedly be an important step in training more transaffirmative counselors and supervisors. Additionally, including training on transaffirmative approaches with TGEY in counselor education programs aligns with the push for multicultural and social justice focused approaches in the field (Chan et al., 2018). As such, counselor educators can help future counselors to understand the complex and nuanced lives of TGEY, learn to recognize the impacts intersecting forms of oppression have on their lives (Edwards-Leeper et al., 2016; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; World Professional Association for Transgender Health, 2012), help client's to feel empowered through sharing their own stories (Bess & Stabb, 2009; Collazo et al., 2013; Israel et al., 2008; McCullough et al., 2017), help advocate *with* clients needing support (Bess & Stabb, 2009; Collazo et al., 2013; Israel et al., 2008; McCullough et al., 2017), and further help TGEY clients build their resilience to cope with dominant and harmful narratives rooted in cisheternormativity (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Singh et al., 2014). By using the results from this study in training future counselors and supervisors, it is hoped counselor educators can begin to address the serious issue surrounding the paucity of training around transaffirmative approaches in counselor education.

In addition to training future school counselors to provide transaffirmative counseling to TGEY, it is imperative that counselor educators also train school

counselors on how they can help advocate for shifting their school environments to be more inclusive. While a number of the participants indicated support from peers, a few still encountered hostile school environments (GLSEN, 2019), a lack of support for navigating being bullied for their identities, and general environments of invisibility and marginalization. As such, calling school counselors and personnel to action is an important step in creating transaffirmative school environments to help mitigate the mental health concerns that can develop due to unsupportive and hostile school environments (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006; Hatchel et al., 2019; Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018).

The results from this study may also motivate counselor educators to require training in this area in their programs for mental health and school counselors (Abreu et al., 2020; Salpietro et al., 2019; Whitman & Han, 2017). Since all participants struggled with various mental health concerns, it is highly likely that counselors will encounter TGEY in their work (whether or not they know it yet). Being a safe space for any youth to explore their gender, and to come out if they are a TGEY, is of utmost importance. Additionally, Valdin and Henry’s experiences within a residential mental health facility highlighted the importance of providing transaffirmative care to TGEY across the board. Like Valdin mentioned, TGEY should not have to “get used to” transphobic and homophobic views and oppression as a part of their mental health treatment. Furthermore, the results from The Trevor Project (2020b), a survey of over 40,000 LGBTQ youth, showed many participants wanted mental health care and did not receive care due to lack of access, and LGBTQ competence of providers. Due to the gravity of mental health concerns that TGEY face, counselors, counselors-in-training, supervisors,

and counselor educators need to have an in-depth understanding of their lives. Through this understanding, counselors, counselors-in-training, supervisors, and counselor educators can provide an affirmative space for TGEY to process their mental health concerns while simultaneously working against the perpetuation (whether unintentionally or intentionally) of oppression against them.

Avoiding Dehumanization

Another aspect of providing transaffirmative approaches to counseling centers around understanding the clients' own experiences and treating them as a *whole person*. This also ties into intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), which encourages people to be seen as whole people with their complex and intersecting identities. While the themes presented in Chapter IV were presented based on individual identities and experiences, the researcher recognizes the intersecting and complex lives and experiences of the participants. Experiences cannot be extrapolated into one category, but was done so for the presentation of themes. Therefore, recognizing the importance of seeing TGEY as whole people, has also been cited in the literature as providing a transaffirmative approach (Smith et al., 2014).

As such, when training future counselors and supervisors, it will be important to convey the simultaneous importance of increasing knowledge and awareness of the nuanced lives of TGEY, while also viewing them as whole people. Counselor educators, counselors, counselors-in-training, and supervisors can use the rich explorations in this study to understand the participants' conceptualizations of gender, while also seeing all of the additional identities and facets of their lives. This will not further contribute to feelings of dehumanization as discussed by the participants. Additionally, not further

contributing to the feelings of dehumanization as discussed by some participants is an important takeaway from this study. Counselor educators can share these stories of dehumanization and oppression from the participants to their trainees.

In sum, while reviewing this research, counselor educators, counselors, counselors-in-training, and supervisors need to be mindful of not approaching their learning in a monocultural lens. By engaging in the entirety of the participants' narratives, counselor educators, counselors, counselors-in-training, and supervisors can simultaneously learn about the way participants' experience their genders, while holding *more* space for all the additional ways in which the participants engaged with the world and their identities.

Implications

This study is the first known Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study (to date) that captures and highlights the complex experiences of TGEY in their own words. As such, this study has addressed an important gap in the literature: sharing how TGEY experience their gender in their own words (Singh et al., 2014) instead of how these experiences have been filtered through the lenses of researchers and helping professionals. Through these results, counselors, counselors-in-training, and counselor educators can understand how TGEY experienced their gender identities, additional intersecting identities, and made meaning out of their identities within the current social, cultural, historical, and political factors. These last contextualizations provide an important contribution to the literature as well. During the time of data collection, participants were experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic and political unrest in the

United States, which also uniquely framed their experiences of their genders, races and ethnicities, and additional identities.

This study and the results are an act of contributing to multiculturalism and social justice within the field of counselor education itself. This holds true due to the unique exploration of the participants' experiences in their own words, with their narratives positioned above the researcher's. All participants engaged in member checking, navigating their own stories and themes exactly how they wanted them shared with the world. Their voices rise in a symphony of divergent and convergent experiences shedding light on the intricacies of their lives. Since one of the first components to striving towards multiculturalism and social justice competence in the counselor education field is knowledge (Ratts et al., 2016), the results from this study share a wealth of in-depth knowledge of the participants' experiences with the world.

Additionally, interwoven throughout the participants' narratives and superordinate themes are a rich exploration into their experiences of power, privilege and oppression within their own lives. This exploration continues to push the literature in the field around TGEY beyond a monocultural lens of solely exploring their gender identities without including these historical, social, cultural, and political factors. As such, the results share unique experiences of TGEY navigating mental health challenges, disabilities, non-dominant sexual orientations, non-dominant religions and spiritualities, their various abilities and talents, and various additional contextual factors. Although not the main focus of this study, the results provide an illuminating window into the ways that power, privilege and oppression impact the mental health of TGEY (Chung & Bemak, 2012), how they navigate these experiences, and their resilience to an

increasingly chaotic world. Lastly, this study offers an in-depth analysis of the cultural, historical, political, and social aspects of the participants' lives- necessary components of providing transaffirmative care to this population (McCullough et al., 2017).

Perhaps the most powerful implication from this study comes from the participants themselves. The resounding messages the participants wanted to share with the world were that they were “human”, deserving of respect, and “whole people” with complex interests and experiences existing outside of their gender identities. It is both the researcher's and participants' hope that, someday, the genders of TGEY will really not be “that interesting”, and the world will have truly “obliterated” rigid gender binaries in their minds and moved beyond dominant cisheteronormative discourse. It is the researcher's hope that research like this will become outdated, as will the dominant discourse around rigid gender roles and binaries.

Limitations

While the researcher was able to recruit three participants who were BIPOC, none of these participants identified as Black. This could be due to the racial and ethnic distribution within Colorado itself. According to the 2019 Census in Colorado, 86.9% of Coloradoans identified as white, 4.6% Black and/or African American, and 1.6% Native American (United States Census Bureau, 2019). In terms of bi-racial identities, 3.1% of Coloradoans identified as having two or more races and 21.8% identified as Hispanic and/or Latinx (United States Census Bureau, 2019). As such, two participants identified as biracial, with white and Mexican named for Pringles, and white and Chicano named for Valdin. John Joe identified as Native American and white. Therefore, one third of participants in this study were BIPOC participants, a higher percentage than the overall

racial and ethnic composition of Colorado. Unfortunately, due to the lack of Black and/or African American participants, the researcher was unable to contextualize the results with current literature around this population. This may limit the transferability of the findings to Black and/or African American TGEY, especially given the historical, political, cultural, and social justice movement of Black Lives Matter within the United States during data collection and analysis. Additionally, this limitation ties into another limitation around location. All of the participants were recruited from one state: Colorado. Due to the social, geographic, and political locations of the participants being limited to one state, the results may not be transferrable to geographic locations with vastly different compositions.

A tertiary limitation centers around data collection. Due to COVID-19, the individuals participated in online video interviews via Zoom instead of the planned in-person interviews. This likely had an impact on participants, and therefore, the results. As such, participants may have felt more or less comfortable sharing their experiences due to the virtual platform and being within an environment the researcher was not able to control for confidentiality. To try to mitigate this limitation, the researcher discussed confidentiality with the participants prior to the interviews. While the participants did not need parental consent to participate, it is likely some TGEY who were interested in participating were unable to do so because they were not out to their parents and lived at home, for fear that they would have been outed. Lastly, the video platform and being in their own environments could have increased the participants' comfort during the research process; therefore, true implications and limitations of the data collection process cannot be fully known.

Future Directions in Research

As this was the first study explicitly exploring the intricacies of the lives of TGEY in their own words while using an IPA framework, there are numbers directions for future research. First, future research can continue to contribute to the field by contributing more literature about the experiences of TGEY through their own voices. Another direction of future research would be to continue to use IPA with this population to explore their experiences and contextualize their converging and diverging themes. Since various themes emerged from this exploratory study connected to their gender identities, future research could explore each of the specific themes with IPA, in-depth, such as the experiences of TGEY with: mental health and treatment, friends, family, being Generation Z, sexual orientations, race and ethnicity. Future IPA research could especially explore the experiences of Black and/or African American TGEY, due to the dearth of those identities within this study. Due to COVID-19 heavily impacting this study, and the world, the researcher is curious to see similar studies exploring the lives of TGEY and how different they may be in a world post-pandemic. Lastly, an important direction for future research would be to try and determine the impact learning about TGEY, such as through this study, has on the competencies of counselors and counselors-in-training in working with TGEY.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand how TGEY experienced their gender identities, additional intersecting identities, and made sense of their experiences in their own words. Through an IPA methodology exploring the lives of nine TGEY, the researcher found that these experiences could be comprised of six superordinate themes.

These superordinate themes encompassed their gender journeys, experiences of multiple forms of oppression, their interpersonal relationships, mental and physical health concerns, navigating the historical, political, social, and cultural contextual factors within their lives, and their resiliency. Many of the participants' experiences echoed findings in the literature, while simultaneously strengthening these findings due to the rich qualitative nature of this study. Results from this study have profound implications within the field of Counselor Education by increasing the knowledge in the field around the complex and nuanced lives of TGEY. Future studies can further explore the lives of TGEY, in the hopes to continue to strengthen the knowledge and awareness of their experiences. Lastly, while this study illuminated multifarious components of the lives and experiences of TGEY, the importance of holding space for their entire experiences cannot be understated.

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APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Share Your Story with Me



My name is Ellie and I am a queer and nonbinary researcher. I am looking for **transgender and gender expansive people between the ages of 13-17 to share their stories with me** about what it is like to be a trans and gender expansive teen.

Participants can get up to \$75 in gift cards.

You can participate if you are 13-17 and identify anywhere within the transgender and gender expansive identities (trans, nonbinary, genderqueer, agender, demi-boy, demi-girl, neutrois, genderfluid, bi-gender, two-spirit, and lots of additional gender identities). If you are not yet out, it's okay- I will work with you to find ways to protect your identities. *Teens who are from minority racial, ethnic, religious, spiritual, ability, and class identities are encouraged to participate.* The stories you share will be kept confidential.

Text me at: 720-441-6446 for more information.



Please keep this flyer in a safe place to not accidentally out someone

Please visit Surveillance Self Defense for ways to safely access LGBTQ resources and protect your identities: at <https://ssd.eff.org/en/playlist/lgbtq-youth>

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Northern Colorado. IRB #:

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW MATERIALS

OPEN-ENDED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND PROTOCOL

Interviews will be scheduled at least one week in advance. Before the first interview, the researcher will review the assent forms with the TGEY and their trusted adult. Youth will be instructed that they can decline to answer any question at any time. Youth will be informed through their assents that these interviews will be recorded and transcribed verbatim.

First-Interview: These are some of the open-ended questions that could be asked during the first interview. As the conversation progresses, the youth and researcher may decide to address additional components.

Main Interview Questions:

- What are some of the identities you have that are important to you?
- How would you describe your gender identity in this moment?
- What are some aspects of your gender identity that you are proud of?
- What is it like for you being transgender and/or gender expansive?
- How do you navigate your gender identity at home?
- How do you navigate your gender identity at school?
- How do you navigate your gender identity with friends?
- How do you navigate your gender identity in other places?
- What are some of the experiences you have had in life because of your identity as a youth who is transgender and/or gender expansive?
- What is meaningful to you about your gender identity?
- Tell me about how you make meaning of your gender identity with your other identities?
- What would you like the world to know about what it is like being a youth who is transgender and/or gender expansive?

Follow-up questions:

- Can you give me an example?
- Tell me more about that?
- Can you tell me a story about that?

Second-Interview: The second interview will be more focused and specific to each youth based on the emergent themes from their first interview. These questions could ask the youth to elaborate on various topics they addressed during the first interview. Some potential questions could be:

- In our last conversation, you told me about X, I wonder if you could tell me more about that?
- After our last conversation, I am wondering if you had other things you wanted to tell me?
- How has it been being able to talk about your identities in this way?
- What else would you like to share about your identities since we last meet?
- What would you add to our last conversation?

APPENDIX C
DEMOGRAPHICS QUESTIONNAIRE

DEMOGRAPHICS QUESTIONNAIRE

Please complete this form about your identities to the extent that you feel comfortable. Please use your own words to describe your identities. You can choose to leave anything blank that you do not feel comfortable answering.

A pseudonym (fake name for the study): _____

Age: _____

Gender identity: _____

Pronouns: _____

Racial and ethnic identity/identities: _____

Sexual/affectional/romantic identity/identities: _____

Spiritual and/or religious identities: _____

Socioeconomic status: _____

Abilities and disabilities: _____

Any additional identities you would like me to know:

APPENDIX D

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



Date: 07/24/2020

Principal Investigator: Michelle Saltis

Committee Action: **APPROVED – New Protocol**

Action Date: 7/23/2020

Protocol Number: 2004000915

Protocol Title: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of how Transgender and Gender Expansive Youth Experience Their Gender Identities

Expiration Date: 5/28/2021

Review Type: Full Board

The University of Northern Colorado Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human subjects has reviewed the protocol entitled: *An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of how Transgender and Gender Expansive Youth Experience Their Gender Identities*. The project has been approved for the procedures and subjects described in the protocol.

All research must be conducted in accordance with the procedures outlined in your approved protocol.

This protocol is approved until the expiration date listed above and must be reviewed for renewal on an annual basis for as long as the research remains active. The investigator will need to submit a request for Continuing Review at least 30 days prior to the expiration date. If the study's approval expires, investigators must stop all research activities immediately (including data analysis) and contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs for guidance.

As principal investigator of this research project, you are responsible to:

APPENDIX E

RESOURCES GIVEN TO PARTICIPANTS

RESOURCES FOR TRANS AND GENDER EXPANSIVE TEENS

Personal resources

Chest Binders

- PointofPride.org: teens can request donated binders for free if they are unable to access them (financial reasons, lack of parental support, etc.)
- GC2B: can request donations from GC2B for safe binders for your organization

Name Change Help:

Free name change help from Sara Fitouri at sara.fitouri@gmail.com.

Changing Gender Markers at DMV:

Fill out this form and have your doctor or mental health professional sign off on it:

https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/sites/default/files/DR2083_0.pdf?fbclid=IwAR027rarlb9mjaDTTvhpH9g36SpXU_KEvGH-d46E-MVZOofUnKaaQbqy3zfA

Books

Boy Erased by Gerald Conley

- Gerald's journey of being forced to undergo gay conversion therapy

If I Was Your Girl by Meredith Russo

- a book about a trans teen navigating dating and coming out

Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out by Susan Kuklin

- Stories of 6 transgender teens about their journeys

Transgender History, second edition: The Roots of Today's Revolution by Susan Stryker

- Covers transgender history from the mid-20th century to today, including major events and turning points

Parrotfish by Ellen Wittlinger

- Recently updated to reflect new terms
- A story about a trans kid realizing they are trans and navigating reactions from friends and family

Rethinking Normal: by Katie Rain Hill

- Navigating being trans including undergoing gender reassignment surgery

Being Jazz: My Life as a Transgender Teen by Jazz Jennings

- Story of Jazz who came out as trans at 5 years old and began transitioning

Some Assembly Required: The Not-So-Secret Life of a Transgender Teen by Arin Andrews

- A memoir about 17-year old Arin navigating gender reassignment surgery as a high school student

Community Resources

NoCo SPLASH <https://splashnoco.org>

- support groups (including for parents), queer prom

UNC's Gender and Sexuality Resource Center: <https://www.unco.edu/gender-sexuality-resource-center/>

Out Boulder: <https://www.outboulder.org>

- Youth program for 13+
- Trans-specific services
- Services for friends and Family
- Sometimes might have Binders to Donate

NoCo Equality: <https://nocoequality.org/whats-happening-noco-events/>

- List of resources and local events for LGBTQQIA+ persons

Doctors

Children's Hospital Denver: TRUE Center for Gender Diversity

- Hormone therapy, puberty blocking, consultation with on-site therapists/social workers, referral to therapy and support groups, assistance with legal name changes and gender markers

Colorado State University Associates in Family Medicine

- Emma Richardson specializes in trans and pediatric care

Counseling Resources

- Queer Asterisk
 - Fort Collins, Longmont, Boulder, and Devner Locations
 - All queer and/or trans counselors
 - Have support groups, mentors, and meet-ups as well

Internet Resources

The Trevor Project: offers 24/7 hotline for LGBTQQIA+ youth for suicide prevention, educational workshops, and information about various topics on their website

The Gender Book (thegenderbook.com): An online book and resources for exploring the differences between sex, gender identity and gender expression

Huffington Post: Has an entire queer section:

<https://www.huffingtonpost.com/section/queer-voices>

- Often posts queer-friendly articles such as: "Ruby Rose Breaks Down what it Means to be Gender Fluid" and "17 LGBTQ-Friendly Books to Read to your kids in Honor of Pride"
- They have an entire Pride Section (in June)

Buzzfeed

- Has an entire LGBT section: <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/section/lgbt>

Jeffrey Marsh: www.Jeffreymarsh.com : Jeffrey is a famous nonbinary person who has numerous videos, has done a TED talk, and has lots of resources on their website

Neutrois.com: An entire website for people who are Neutrois or questioning if this might be the gender identity for them

LGBT Foundation: <https://lgbt.foundation> Serves as support and resources for LGBT people; has a specific trans section including support for non-binary individuals as well. Links to support groups and other ways to get help.

It gets better project: <https://itgetsbetter.org> Nonprofit started to help young LGBTQ people struggling with acceptance around their sexual/romantic orientation and gender identity see videos and media from other LGBTQQIA+ people that 'it gets better'.

Gender Spectrum: <https://www.genderspectrum.org> based in California and has online support groups for kids and teens; has tons of information geared towards family, community members, mental health professionals, and medical services. Also has sections on how to navigate messages from various faith about gender identity

CDC Resources for LGBTQQIA+ : <https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth-resources.htm>

GSA Clubs: <https://gsanetwork.org>

- GSA clubs—originally called Gay-Straight Alliance clubs when they first established in the 1980s—are student-run organizations, typically in a high school or middle school, which provide a safe place for students to meet, support each other, and talk about issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. There are three typical functions of a GSA club: Support, Social, and Activist.
- have resources and trainings for youth to become leaders in their communities

One Colorado: <https://one-colorado.org/colorado-gsa-network/>

- Advocacy organization for LGBTQQIA+ people
- Have Colorado Gay-Straight Alliance Groups that are student initiated and student run
- Have resources for students, educators

National School Climate Survey: Colorado:

<https://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/Colorado%20State%20Snapshot%20-%20NSCS.pdf>

- Looks at statistics for the safety of LGBTQ kids and teens in schools in Colorado (2015)
- Run by GLSEN

GLSEN: <https://www.glsen.org/learn/about-glsen>

Advocates for safe schools for LGBTQ kids and teens

Trans Student Educational Resources: <http://www.transstudent.org/gender/>

- Trans resources and advocacy, the gender unicorn, help speak at conferences and schools

Desmond Is Amazing (<https://desmondisamazing.com>)

- 11 year old drag kid who advocates for the LGBTQ community. Website includes his story and advocacy projects

Q Card Project: (<http://www.qcardproject.com>)

- Helping to empower queer/trans* youth in healthcare

RESOURCE LIST FOR TEENS

Counseling Resources

- Psychology Today
 - can look up counselors and therapists in your area
 - Psychologytoday.com
- Summitstone Health Partners- Fort Collins
 - Counselors and Therapists
 - <https://www.summitstonehealth.org>
 - Have a walk-in clinic and 24/7 crisis line: 970.494.4200
- Kids Stuff Counseling- Fort Collins, Loveland, Greeley
 - Work with anyone 17 and under
 - (970) 775-7061
- The Parent-Child Interaction Center & Canopy Counseling- Fort Collins+Boulder
 - Counseling for all ages
 - 970-472-1207
- Heart Centered Counseling- Fort Collins, Loveland, Greeley
 - Counseling for all ages
 - 970-779-4536
- NorthRange Behavioral Health- Greeley/ Weld County
 - Counseling for all ages
 - Have a walk in clinic and 24/7 crisis line
 - Call-844-493-8255 for crisis line
 - Call 970-347-2120 to make an appointment
- Jefferson Center for Mental Health – Denver/ Jefferson County
 - All types of counseling
 - Crisis center and walk-ins
 - 303-425-0300
- Cedar Springs Behavioral Health- El Paso County/ Colorado Springs
 - All counseling services
 - Crisis line and walk-n
 - 888-456-0968

Crisis Lines

- **Suicide hotline:** 1-800-273-8255
- **Crisis/Suicide Text number:** Text 'Talk' to 38255

Apps to help

- Calm Harm
- Headspace

APPENDIX F
MANUSCRIPT

USING INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS WITH
TRANSGENDER AND GENDER EXPANSIVE YOUTH:
LESSONS LEARNED AND IMPLICATIONS

Abstract

There has been a recent increase in the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as a qualitative research methodology within the counseling and counselor education fields. Although applications of IPA within research within the counseling and counselor education fields are increasing, research studies using IPA have rarely addressed transgender and gender expansive experiences. As such, this manuscript builds upon previous literature about using IPA within counseling and counselor education (Miller et al., 2018) and within LGBTQ populations (Chan & Farmer, 2017). To this end, this manuscript provides an in-depth framework for using IPA research using a recent IPA study on how transgender and gender expansive youth experience their gender identities. This manuscript offers (a) an overview of the needs of transgender and gender expansive youth, (b) basic IPA principles, (c) an in-depth account of the research methodology, (d) a presentation of themes from the participants' experiences of the research process, (e) the researchers' reflection on the research process, and (f) implications within counseling and counselor education.

Keywords: interpretative phenomenological analysis, transgender, gender expansive, gender identity, youth

Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis with Transgender and Gender Expansive Youth: Lessons Learned and Implications

There are more youth identifying within the transgender and gender expansive umbrella than ever before (Flores et al., 2016; GLAAD, 2017). This trend is due, in large part, to a greater societal acceptance of transgender and gender expansive identities (GLAAD, 2017). Researchers estimate that at least one percent of the population is transgender and gender expansive youth (TGEY), with an even larger percent who are exploring their gender identities (Clark et al., 2014; Shields et al., 2013; Turban & Ehrensaft, 2018). It is therefore likely that an ever-increasing population of counseling clients and research participants will identify as transgender or gender expansive.

Recently, there has been an increase in research using IPA methodologies within the counselor education and supervision fields (see Dawson & Akhurst, 2015; Dickens et al., 2016; Farmer & Byrd, 2015; Kastrani et al., 2015; Lister et al., 2020; McCullough et al., 2017; Miller & Barrio Minton, 2016; Saltis, *in progress*; White et al., 2020).

Although research using this approach has dramatically increased, only a few articles have provided a review and application of IPA in the counseling and counselor education fields, and multiple researchers have noted the eminent surge of IPA methodology (Allan & Eatough, 2016; Chan & Farmer, 2017; Miller et al., 2018). Therefore, this article provides an important framework for applying IPA within the fields of counseling and counselor education by sharing the lessons learned from the participants and researchers on using IPA with TGEY.

As such, the purpose of this article is to contribute to the counseling literature a detailed account of using IPA to study the experiences of TGEY. This account will

include (a) a brief overview of IPA methodology in general; (b) why IPA is a good fit for counseling research and research with TGEY; (c) how the researcher used IPA methodology, data collection, and analysis during the study; (d) participant and researcher reactions; and (e) implications for counseling and counselor education to further study TGEY with this qualitative research methodology. This overview elicits insights to contribute to the wider use of IPA methodology and indicates the meaning and potential of using IPA to study TGEY in qualitative research.

IPA Overview

IPA was created as an extension to traditional phenomenology (Miller et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Whereas traditional phenomenology converges the experiences of participants' into an "essence" of a phenomenon (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018; Hays & Wood, 2011), IPA presents both the convergence and divergence of lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Focusing on divergence allows for a more individualized approach, which provides space for how participants make meaning from their experiences (Allan & Eatough, 2016). Additionally, IPA follows a double-hermeneutic approach, where the researcher provides their own interpretations of the meaning participants' made from their experiences (Miller et al., 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). These interpretations also focus on contextualizing the converging and diverging themes within current social, political, historical, and cultural factors in participants' lives (Miller et al., 2018; Smith, 2011). Therefore, the IPA methodology preserves individuals' diversity of experiences, allows for the exploration of context, and prioritizes relationship to life narratives (Chan & Farmer, 2017; Smith et al., 2009).

Fit within Counseling and Counselor Education

Due to IPA's idiographic nature, this methodology fits well within the counseling and counselor education fields. According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), this idiographic approach allows for the uniqueness of each individual participants' lived experiences to shine. Because counseling and counselor education prizes the importance of honoring each individual's unique set of experiences, IPA aligns closely with the field's philosophical underpinnings. Miller et al. (2018) specifically elaborated on the way that IPA allows for individual meaning-making of participants' narratives and for "dynamic engagement" between the researcher and participant, which makes the methodology "well-suited" for research within counselor education. More experienced researchers within counseling and counselor education can push the boundaries of IPA methodology and infuse more creative approaches within data analysis (Miller et al., 2018). This also aligns with basic IPA methodology; although methodological guidelines have been provided, Smith and colleagues (2009) invite researchers to expand and adapt to the needs of each individual study.

Because counseling and counselor education has a heavy focus on multiculturalism and social justice (Ratts et al., 2016), IPA allows for an in-depth exploration of contextual factors, power, privilege, and oppression (Chan & Farmer, 2017). This philosophical angle aligns distinctly with the "social justice praxis" common within the counseling and counselor education research (Miller et al., 2018). Lastly, IPA research and counseling skills can be transferrable; both require organization, flexibility, interviewing, analyzing, and communicating a sense of positive regard (Finlay, 2011; Miller et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009).

Fit for Studying TGEY

It is important to discuss the fit of the IPA methodology specifically with the TGEY population. As posited by Chan and Farmer (2017), IPA is a good fit for research within LGBTQ populations due to flexibility, the inclusion of contextual factors, and attention to making sense of identities and lived experiences. This compatibility is due, in large part, to the idiographic and double-hermeneutic approach within IPA (Chan & Farmer, 2017; Smith, 2011). Because research within transgender and gender expansive populations can run the risk of overgeneralizing experiences and contributing to reinforce a reductionist and binaried view on gender identity, IPA allows for a celebration of similarities and differences with participants' experiences (see Farmer & Byrd, 2015; Lister et al., 2020; McCullough et al., 2017; White et al., 2020). Furthermore, IPA studies frame experiences within cultural factors, which highlights the ways oppression impacts the lives of participants. Because TGEY are at the intersections of multiple historically oppressed identities as youth and transgender and/or gender expansive individuals, IPA is conducive for the use of intersectionality and naturally refutes dominant oppressive narratives (Chan & Farmer, 2017; Miller et al., 2018). With the flexibility and space for participants to define their experiences in their own words (Singh et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2009), they are able to characterize the nuances among their experiences, even if they share similar labels and definitions of their identities.

Research Process

To add to extant research on the use of IPA in counseling, counselor education, and LGBTQ+ communities, a detailed account using exemplars from an IPA study on

TGEY experiences of their gender identities will be used (Saltis, *in progress*). This example will simultaneously provide a framework for applying IPA research within the counseling and counselor education fields, as well as provide a specific framework for conducting an IPA study with TGEY.

Ontological, Epistemological, and Theoretical Underpinnings

Relativism and historical realism were the ontological frameworks that grounded the original study within a subjective, interpretative, an idiographic social constructionist epistemology (Crotty, 1998; Miller et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009). These underpinnings allowed for full exploration of the participants' subjective narratives, the meaning made within those narratives, and how social, cultural, historical and political factors shaped their experiences. These ontological and epistemological considerations also recognized that the researcher had influence over this process. For instance, the researchers did not believe that they could be fully objective and removed from the research process. The researchers, as is the nature in IPA research, socially constructed the findings with the participants as well as provided additional interpretations and contextualization of their experiences through the lenses of current cultural, historical, political and social factors. It is also assumed in IPA research that the research and findings will be influenced by the researchers' positionality, interpretation, and interactions with participants. As such, the primary researcher was open with participants about their own social locations, such as being queer and nonbinary.

Theoretically, the original study was grounded within interpretivism, critical theory, and intersectionality as these fit naturally within IPA methodology (Chan & Farmer, 2017; Miller et al., 2018). These postmodern theoretical orientations were strong

undercurrents to queering the original study. For instance, explicit exploration of power, privilege and oppression were explored within the participants' own identities, social locations, experiences and worldviews, as well as within additional contextualization (e.g., social, political). Additionally, the researcher queerly engaged with the entire research process. This queering of the processing included making their own social locations known to participants and exploring participants' lives outside the traditional confines of interviews such as listening to the music they created. It also included engaging in a thorough member-checking process that gave participants complete freedom to choose how data was organized, which pieces of data they wanted removed, and which they wanted kept in the final presentation of data.

Participants and Recruitment

It is recommended that IPA studies focus on five to ten relatively homogeneous participants (Miller et al., 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). As such, purposeful and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit nine TGEY participants between the ages of 13-17 (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There were three inclusion criteria for this study: (a) the participants were between the ages of 13-17, (b) they identified within the transgender and/or gender expansive umbrella, and (c) they could identify a trusted adult to be present for the assent process. For this study, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) allowed for *in loco parentis*, which meant that participants needed a trusted adult present for the assent process, which may or may not have been their parents or caregivers. This element was especially important to protect the safety of participants who were not out and ensure that they would not compromise their safety by participating in the study. In order to further reduce the risk of overgeneralizing participant experiences, participants

with additional historically oppressed identities (e.g., Black, Indigenous, People of Color [BIPOC]) were also recruited. The researcher sent recruitment flyers to various agencies and groups working within the LGBTQ youth communities through email as the first step in the purposeful sampling methods. Participants in the study were asked to share the recruitment flyer and/or information about the study with any other youth they knew that fit the inclusion criteria, especially those who identified within the BIPOC communities. This was a part of the snowball sampling method.

Data Collection

The most common form of data collection within IPA studies is the use of semistructured interviews (Miller et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009). As such, the researcher met with the participants for two 60-90 minute semi-structured interviews. The interviews occurred over Zoom, due to the COVID-19 pandemic interrupting the possibility for in-person interviews. Interview questions generally asked about how the participants' understood their gender identities and intersections with other social identities (e.g., race, ethnicity), how they navigated their identities in the world, and how they made meaning of their experiences. The researcher also collected demographics through an open-ended demographics questionnaire to stay true to the idiographic nature of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). The open-ended nature of the demographics questionnaire and semistructured interview provided the participants with the space to share their experiences in their own words (Singh et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2009). The interviews were recorded and transcribed through a digital transcription service which was then verified and edited for accuracy by the first author.

Data Analysis

Data analysis during an IPA study is an iterative process, where both data collection and analysis occur simultaneously (Smith et al., 2009). Although Smith et al., (2009) outlined an important step-by step guide to data analysis, they highlighted the flexible and fluid nature of data analysis. As such, Smith et al., (2009) encouraged researchers to engage in data analysis that makes sense for their studies. Therefore, the researcher closely followed the data analysis steps provided by Smith et al., (2009), while infusing some of their own analysis techniques as appropriate. The specific steps followed by Smith et al., (2009) were (a) reading and re-reading, (b) initial noting, (c) developing emergent themes, (d) searching for connections across emergent themes, (e) moving to the next case, and (f) looking for patterns across cases. These steps were also followed with a second coder, to increase the trustworthiness and rigor of the data analysis. The researcher wove creative analytic techniques within the traditional framework. The entire data process also involved a second person, to increase trustworthiness of the analysis.

The first step in data analysis was reading and re-reading (Smith et al., 2009). The transcribed transcript was read fully before any analysis began by both researchers independently. The primary researcher made note of any reactions within their bridling journal. This step allowed for full immersion into the participants' stories. During this reading, the researchers paid attention to participants' individual language, style of communication, worldview, behaviors, feelings, and beliefs (Smith et al., 2009).

Additionally, this initial reading gave the researchers a chance to get a feel for the interview, including the structure, rapport, and any contradictions in their narratives.

The second step in the data analysis was the initial noting (Smith et al., 2009). In this phase, the researcher traditionally goes through the transcript line by line, making comments in the margins based on different aspect of participants' narratives. For this analysis, the researchers went through each transcript line-by-line, color-coding the text, and making comments underneath quotes and sections of text independent from one another. As outlined by Smith et al., (2009), three aspects of the participants' narratives were color-coded: descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual. *Descriptive* aspects of their narratives included content that mattered to the participant, such as key objects, experiences, events, people and emotions. These were changed to blue ink. *Linguistic* aspects focus on the use of language, such as words and phrases within participants' narratives. Linguistic aspects generally involved the use of metaphor, pauses, laughter, repetition, tone, degree of fluency, and pronoun use within their narratives. These were coded in green ink. *Conceptual* components of the participant's narrative, such as cultural, historical, political, and social factors were colored in purple ink. Conceptual components also included any of the researchers' own questions, ponderings, or reactions. Underneath quotes and text, comments were made about any of these three areas. It is important to note that each transcript and each case was analyzed independently from other cases; the researchers bracketed any previous codes and interpretations during this part of the data analysis process.

The third phase of data analysis was developing emergent themes (Smith et al., 2009). For this phase, the researchers went through each color-coded transcript, as done

within step two above, to begin to note themes. Again, the researchers did this step independent of one another. These steps were done with comments in the margins of the transcript and focused on various descriptive, linguistic, and/or conceptual components of their narratives. Themes were often taken in the form of direct quotes and phrases from participants in order to maintain true to their own words. After this process was completed, the themes were added into a codebook chronologically. This became the first codebook. Each transcript for each participant had this codebook.

In the fourth phase of data analysis, the researchers then began to look for any connections across the emerging themes, based on instructions from Smith et al., (2009). This included grouping similar themes together in a process called abstraction. These groupings of similar emergent themes then led to the creation of superordinate themes. Subsumation is the process by which an emergent theme becomes the superordinate theme, which keeps the research true to the participants' language. Any contradictory themes were also kept to highlight convergence and divergence within their own narratives; this is called polarization. The result of this process became codebook two. Each participant had a codebook two. Any themes and reactions from the first interview was bracketed before doing process one-three with the second one. Therefore, each participant ended up with two transcripts that independently went through the data analysis steps described previously. This process was then repeated again to aggregate all the of the data from each participant's codebook two into their third and final codebook. Then the researchers moved onto the next case, which is step five (Smith et al., 2009).

As true to IPA methodology, these data analysis and data collection steps occurred simultaneously and involved a fair amount of dialogue (Miller et al., 2018;

Smith et al., 2009). The primary researcher kept a bridling journal throughout the process, which the second researcher had access to. While both the researcher and second coder analyzed the data independently, they came together as often as possible to discuss reactions, emerging themes, and contextualization. They met together to reach consensus of the codes after this fourth phase of data analysis as well.

After the researchers met together and reached consensus for the final codebook for each participant, the primary researcher then engaged in member checking with each participant. This process involved a third 60-90 minute meeting with each participant. The researcher shared their screen with the participant and went through the final codebook with them. Throughout this meeting, the researcher and participant co-constructed the final codebook. Participants had the final say in which quotes were kept, any edits that were made, and any re-grouping of themes. This ensured that the participants' voices were above that of the researchers' to avoid as much bias as possible.

In the sixth phase of data analysis, after the completion of all of the previous data analysis steps, the researchers moved on to look for patterns across the participants (Smith et al., 2009). During this phase the third codebooks for participants were aggregated, based on the guidelines for IPA methodology. This phase included following a similar process to step four above. The researchers grouped similar themes together, following abstraction, and subsumption to reach superordinate themes. Since there was such a large amount of data, the researchers decided to make this process as visual as possible, to allow for ease of seeing the convergent and divergent aspects of each participant's narrative. As such, each participant's' final individual codebooks were given a certain color, such as blue or green. Then, all nine of the participants' final codebooks

were aggregated into a fourth and final codebook that captured the divergent and converging themes across all of the cases. These were grouped into superordinate themes and sub-themes. Both researchers did this phase independently, and then met to reach consensus of the themes for the final codebook. Descriptions of each superordinate theme and sub-theme followed, including the researcher's reactions and social, cultural, historical, and political contextualization to the narratives. The resulting product was a detailed account of the participants' experiences, which was visually presented in a rainbow of converging and diverging themes. This final codebook became the basis for the results section in the study.

Participant Reactions

Within the study, we addressed specific experiences on conducting IPA specifically with TGEY in response to the question: "How was this research process for the participants?" At the end of the second interview and/or member checking process, the researcher asked the participants how it was to engage in the research process. Participants also shared general reflections throughout the data collection process. Since it is important within IPA research, as well as within the author's research frameworks to elevate the voices of participants above their own, hearing the participants' responses to the research is highlight important. The following captures the various themes that emerged based on the participants' experience of engaging with IPA research with a queer researcher.

"This was nice"

Many participants said that they thought the IPA research process was 'nice'. Participants stated they liked participating, felt heard, and that it was "fun" to be able to

share their stories. When asked how the research process was for them, Mx. Peacock stated: “it’s been nice.” Similarly, Pringles stated: “this was really nice.” She also stated that she was “glad I did this.” John Joe shared that they felt heard, and appreciated “not having words put into [his] own mouth.” He also stated that he really appreciated the researcher reflecting back to him what he said. These two pieces of data highlighted the importance of the researcher intentionally trying to minimize hierarchies and create an accepting space. For John Joe, he clearly appreciated the way queer IPA research allowed him the freedom to express himself in his own words.

Zinniah and Mason both stated: “I like it.” Elaborating further, Mason stated: “it’s nice to be able to just kind of spill it all out there.” Both of these participants indicated the importance of being able to share their stories and have someone that listened to them. Valdin explained: “This is gonna be a fun experience for me. I love sharing my story with other people.” He/they also shared: “that was pretty good. I liked your topics tonight.” This last piece of data also highlighted the importance of carefully selecting interview questions for participants. Pringles and Debbie Reynolds both shared that they “would have honestly done this for free.” When asked how the research process went, Debbie Reynolds also stated that “you’re not gunna be the first that’s sat there and listened through all of it,” while joking that the researcher should then write her memoir. Lastly, Debbie Reynolds stated: “I appreciate you and thank you so much for listening to my rants.” Overall, most of the participants seemed to enjoy being a part of the research process, felt like it was a nice and enjoyable experience, and felt heard and validated in their stories.

Appreciation for Shared Identities

When the researcher asked Mason and John Joe what participating in the study was like, they both shared appreciation that the researcher was a part of the transgender community. John Joe stated: “you said 'dysphoria can be a complicated and hard thing to talk about'. Which is, I've never heard out of a cishet person's mouth...that was like a huge feeling for me of like, really authentically being heard.” For John Joe who had limited exposure to transgender people in his own life, being able to connect to the researcher in this way was a powerful tool for his vulnerability, feeling heard, and feeling understood. This experience highlights the importance of having queer researchers using queer-friendly research methodology like IPA within queer communities. Additionally, Mason shared that: “it is nice to talk to someone who actually understands what I'm talking about. (laughs). Because like, it's kind of hard to explain to cishet people any of that, because it's just so foreign.” For Mason, they felt like they were able to lean more into their experiences and share about their identities due to the shared identities with the researcher. In sum, these two participants were able to explicitly name the importance of having shared identities with the researcher for the IPA research process.

‘Don’t Have Many Spaces for This’

Three participants were able to share that they did not have many spaces like the one provided through the research process in their everyday lives. These participants appreciated being able to have the research space for themselves. John Joe expressed that the interview space was a space to tell his story and be heard, which “doesn’t happen in 99% of spaces” for him. Similarly, Lynn stated that he did not talk about “these topics in casual conversation all that much.” Pringles appreciated having the space to share outside

of just her friend group. “It was nice to just, you know, get it off my chest...somebody who's not just my friends,” she said. When asked more about this, she replied:

when you're talking with friends, you kind of just keep it minimal,
because...there's not a lot of room for like, real serious conversations, unless
there's like drama that you're trying to figure out and things like that. Um, so it's
nice to have like, a genuine conversation about that kind of thing.

These quotes and phrases illustrate the way participants conceptualized the research space compared to spaces in their everyday lives.

Vulnerable and Intimidating

Some participants were able to share that this experience was intimidating at first. Some were not sure if there were hidden expectations, as had been their experience in other adult interactions. The researcher was also a new person, so it was hard to warm up in the beginning. To work within these frameworks, the researcher explicitly stated many times throughout the research process that the only “agenda” they had was a “gay one” and to hear their stories. Although there were semistructured interview questions, the researcher asked participants to share anything they thought was important to their stories. Although the researcher worked diligently to mitigate power differentials, they still represented numerous privileged identities, such as white, middle class, and educated.

Participants also shared examples of the feelings of intimidation and vulnerability. John Joe shared that he felt intimidated in the beginning of the research process and that he got more comfortable as the interview progressed. Lynn shared: “It's kind of vulnerable. Like I feel like I'm a little bit exposed.” He also felt like it was harder to make

a connection since it was over video instead of person. Zinniah shared that it was hard for her/it to respond without the researcher asking more direct questions. She said: “I work best when you ask me questions, and then I just respond.” She/it also shared: “I can't really come up with like things to say out of my mind.” This quote highlighted the difficulty for some participants to share their narratives unprompted.

Pringles explained that the research process was “initially terrifying”. “It was kind of terrifying, honestly, but like not in a bad way, you know, just kind of like, it's not something I've really gotten to do,” she further elaborated. She also stated to the researcher that: “you're like, a completely new person to me still.” This data shows how intimidating the research process can be to participants, no matter the precautions taken by the researcher. Although some participants said they were initially intimidated, this experience improved over time. As an example, Pringles shared: “I'm less terrified of you now. Like the first the first half hour or so, of the first session was a bit rough for me.” Pringles also felt like the co-created space between the researcher and her was important for her vulnerability. She stated: “I tend to trust people pretty quickly. But like, I mean, especially with like, when, when it's a therapist, that takes a few sessions, just for me to get comfortable. So I mean, world record on your part, honestly.” This last quote speaks to the way the researcher was able to create a safe research environment for the participant. John Joe had also felt similarly in feeling initially intimidated, with disclosing increased comfort as the research progressed. Overall, the research process was intimidating and required vulnerability. By the end of the three 60-90 minute interviews, participants reported feeling less intimidated.

Participation as Advocacy

Lynn, as the advocate he was, shared that he wanted to participate in the study to help with the research process and ‘changing the world’; he had a strong value of advocacy and education, a part of which was using his experiences to make the world a more accepting place for people who were transgender and/or gender expansive. When asked about what it was like to participate, he stated: “I’m also helping with research and changing the world.” Although Lynn was the only participant to directly name this, many of the participants also valued advocacy in their lives; many of them likely participated to contribute to research.

“Learned more About Myself”

Pringles was able to share that she learned more about herself by sharing her story, highlighting that this was a mutually beneficial process for the researcher and participant. “I’ve actually learned some extra stuff about myself,” Pringles stated. Further elaborating, she said: “while in thinking and preparing for this... forced me to think about certain things, which was honestly pretty nice, you know, helped me realize a lot of stuff about myself that I didn’t know going into this.” Lastly, Pringles stated that: “it was pretty enlightening is what I got out of this.” Although Pringles was sharing her story with the world to help others learn about her experience, she ended up learning a lot more about herself in the process than she thought she would. While Pringles was the only participant to directly name this, it is likely other participants also learned about themselves.

Researcher Reflections

Due to the underpinnings of IPA, it is understood that the researcher(s) cannot be separated from the research process (Miller et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2009). So, what was it like for the primary researcher, a queer and non-binary counselor and counselor

educator, to conduct IPA research with TGEY? Powerful. For this author, the specific idiographic, focused and double-hermeneutic process allowed for an invaluable research experience. During the research interviews with participants, both the researcher and participants were able to create lasting connections. For instance, many of the last meetings with participants involved both the participants and the researcher expressing sadness that their relationship was over, and wishing for it to continue.

Being able to spend countless hours with the participants' narratives allowed for such a nuanced and deep exploration of their lives as well. Since IPA preserves convergent and divergent themes, it was a powerful way to be fully immersed in the similarities and differences in experiences with TGEY. Although the entire research process was incredibly time-consuming, it was truly the best fit for the researcher and participants. Because of the in-depth process, the researcher feels honored that the participants' narratives have been captured in such an in-depth and complex way, which gives way to truly celebrating their lives and experiences instead of collapsing them into one-dimensional and flat narratives. Lastly, as a queer researcher, it seems like IPA was a perfect meld of being able to understand participants, being able to show up authentically within the research themselves, and being able to contextualize the experiences within current social, cultural, historical and political factors.

Additionally, the second researcher was heavily involved in the data analysis process. Her thoughts about the experience follows: As a queer ciswoman, the second researcher found the coding process of IPA to be incredibly enlightening as to the experience of gender expansive youth. Hearing such transparent, vulnerable, and honest stories was an eye-opening experience for the second researcher. Many hours were spent

completely entrenched in these stories in a way that is not afforded to most, and as such the second researcher feels honored to be privy to such personal narratives. As mentioned by the first researcher, though the IPA process took many hours, it allowed both researchers to see the thread that holds the individual stories together, as well as the differences in lived experience of the participants. This is especially true as a researcher whose lived experience is that of a cisgender woman. IPA was not only a good fit to fully capture the experience of participants, it was an especially good fit due to the current sociopolitical climate occurring within the country at the time of data collection related to the Trump presidency, COVID-19, as well as the Black Lives Matter movement.

Implications and Future Directions

The authors believe using IPA within research with TGEY has implications for the fields of counseling and counselor education, as well as research conducted therein. The following section shares the lessons learned from this IPA study with TGEY, and how these can apply to counseling, counselor education, and research with this population.

Implications for Counseling and Counselor Education

Because conducting IPA research and counseling have similar and transferrable skills (Miller et al., 2009; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), there are some takeaways from this study within the field of counseling and counselor education. For instance, several researchers name the importance of providing a confidential and safe (therapeutic) relationship, which allows transgender and/or gender expansive client to freely explore their gender (see Bockting et al., 2006; Collazo et al., 2013; Ehrensaft, 2012, 2013; Edwards-Leeper et al., 2016). This aspect is also true for TGEY of Color by providing a

safe space to talk about their experiences, including adultism (Singh, 2013). The voices of LGBTQ youth themselves also call for a safe and accepting space with a competent counselor to provide services to them (The Trevor Project, 2020b).

The reactions from the participants about the research process echoed these recommendations for providing transaffirmative counseling within conceptual and empirical research. Many of the participants shared that they felt like the space offered in the research process, although different to counseling yet similar in some ways, was helpful. For instance, some participants expressed gratitude to be able to share their stories. An example of this was when John Joe expressed appreciation for the research space to talk about these “topics”, which “doesn’t happen in 99% of spaces”.

Additionally, as the researcher tried to reduce hierarchies contributing to adultism, some participants expressed appreciation for having a space to be heard and respected for who they were. Lastly, some participants, such as Mason, shared the importance of having a researcher with shared identities, since they could feel more understood. As such, counselor educators can train future counselors and supervisors on the importance of providing TGEY a safe, confidential, accepting, understanding and knowledgeable space in which they can explore their experiences.

Implications for Research

This article presents numerous implications for IPA research within counseling and counselor education, especially IPA research with TGEY. Although Chan and Farmer (2017) postulated that IPA would be well-suited research with LGBTQ populations, only a handful of published empirical research studies within counseling and counselor education have explicitly applied IPA to LGBTQ+ communities (see Farmer &

Byrd, 2015; Lister et al., 2020; McCullough et al., 2017; White et al., 2020) while none have used IPA specifically with TGEY. Findings from the participants yielded a number of insightful perspectives from TGEY participants about the research process of an IPA study. These include (a) ways to “queer” IPA research, (b) engaging in an entirely virtual IPA process, (c) various applications for IPA research with transgender and/or gender expansive youth.

“Queering” IPA Research

As a result, this article can serve as an example for ways to “queer” IPA research in general, such as data analysis methods of color-coding specific themes and color-coding the participants’ narratives within the final presentation of themes within the final codebook. The ways that the primary researcher engaged with participants was inherently queer as well, which worked against dominant narratives of professional research. This included having a queer recruitment flyer, which disclosed the primary researcher’s queer and non-binary identities, as well as had numerous transgender and gender expansive flags throughout. The primary researcher also queerly engaged with the research as well, by encouraging participants to expand outside of traditional narratives; this included inviting participants to share their art, rooms, pictures of their lives and even their music. As an example, one participant had put out a music album and sent it to the researcher to listen to. While this could not be included in the final analysis due to confidentiality reasons, this helped the researcher truly immerse into and understand the complex lives of that participant and their experiences.

Using IPA in a Virtual Format

This research was also conducted virtually, with sound results; further expanding the possibilities for IPA research within virtual formats, as it had been previously recommended for in-person interviews (Smith et al., 2009) to form close relationships. Both the participants and the researcher were able to develop a close and safe research relationship, as highlighted within participants' responses. While one participant noted it was harder to connect on screen, all of the participants were able to form a connection with the researcher virtually to share their stories.

Using IPA with Transgender and/or Gender Expansive Youth

Lastly, the participants' themselves shared key insights into using IPA research within this population. These insights included their emotional reactions and appreciations for the research process. Some participants also expressed appreciation for the research space allowing for a deeper exploration of their experiences, a contrast to many of their experiences in the world. Additionally, participants explored their feelings with intimidation and vulnerability.

The reactions of the participants to the research shed light on a few important takeaways for doing IPA research with this population in the future. Most of the participants described the research process was "nice", they "liked it", felt heard, felt appreciated, and felt validated. Additionally, a few participants discussed the validation they felt by participating in research with a queer and nonbinary researcher, as they felt there was more shared understanding of experiences. This included the participant Mason. As such, future IPA research with this population can work to queer the research process as much as possible, and researchers should strongly consider including queer and/or transgender researchers within the process itself.

The way some participants shared that the research space itself was not like “99%” of other spaces in their world, such as John Joe and Lynn, highlights the importance of creating a safe and validating space for participants. These pieces of data show the importance of including TGEY within the research process, where their voices are elevated, and their stories are valued. The research space, it seemed, was a healing and safe space for participants. Their voices are needed within research and having their voices heard is an invaluable contribution to the field. As such, future research with this population should work to mitigate power hierarchies, include ample opportunities for member-checking, and give participants the final say in which words of theirs are shared with the world.

It is incredibly important for research with participants who have multiple intersecting historically oppressed identities to not exploit their experiences solely for the researchers’ benefits. Through this research process, it appeared that the participants were able to benefit as well. Pringles discussed how they learned more about herself and her identities throughout the process. Lynn felt that by participating in this research, he was contributing to “changing the world”, hopefully leading to more acceptance of TGEY. It seems that IPA research provides benefits for the participants as well, such as being able to share their stories, feel heard, and learn more about themselves in the process. Additionally, these examples serves as another reason for why including TGEY in their own research is an irreplaceable experience for not only the TGEY, but for the counseling and counselor education fields.

Another lesson learned was that, in spite of all the researcher’s efforts to minimize hierarchies and expectations, a few participants discussed feeling intimidated and

vulnerable. John Joe named trying to frame his responses in ways that were helpful for the researcher, for example, even with repeated reminders that all of his story was important. This lesson highlights the importance of structuring interviews to have less “sensitive” questions in the beginning, so that rapport and trust can be made. Other participants, like Zinniah and Mason, struggled with having truly open-ended questions throughout the interview. This highlights the importance of having some prepared questions for interviews- providing a totally open-ended space would have been challenging for participants, such as in different types of qualitative methodology. Therefore, being flexible during interviews to meet participants’ needs is necessary.

The participants’ experiences with vulnerability and intimidation also highlight the continued need for mitigating power differentials with TGEY, even for participants who do not directly name their intimidation. Some suggestions from the authors on ways to mitigate power differentials and increase trust and safety include naming the importance of the participants’ own stories, and some use of self-disclosure. For instance, the researcher disclosed their queer and non-binary identities to participants from the beginning with the recruitment flyer, as well as throughout the research process. Additionally, the researcher reminded participants throughout the data collection process that their only research “agenda” was hearing their stories. In sum, using IPA research with a queer, intersectional lens to conduct research with TGEY, is an effective qualitative research methodology for the counseling and counselor education fields.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article contributes to the counseling and counselor education research literature by providing an in-depth analysis and application of how to use an IPA research methodology when conducting research with TGEY. This article reviewed the general underpinnings of IPA and provided a detailed example of how the researchers used and adapted an IPA methodology to fit their research with TGEY. Additionally, this article presented themes from the participants' themselves about their experiences with the research. Lastly, the researchers shared their own experiences of the research process and provided implications for counseling, counselor education, and research with TGEY. The implications and applications from this article can pave the way for future research with TGEY and within broader LGBTQ youth communities in the counseling and counselor education.

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